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## A descriptive analysis of sport nationalism, digital media, and fandom to launch the Canadian Premier League

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Media Studies

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## Abstract

In April 2019, the Canadian Premier League (CPL), a professional domestic soccer league, launched in Canada, making it the first top-tier league in North America to begin operations in the modern digital era. The CPL represents a unique and timely opportunity to examine how a new professional sports league cultivates ties with fan-consumers via sport nationalism, digital media, and fandom. As yet, there are very few academic works on the CPL, and there is also a paucity of scholarly publications on the launch of new professional sports leagues in the 21st century. For this study, two types of qualitative data were collected: semi-structured interviews with league officials and voices on the Canadian soccer scene; and various primary and secondary sources, most often news articles, along with works on sports sociology and marketing. Despite soccer's status as the "global game," Canadian sport nationalism has historically revolved around hockey. While professional soccer leagues in Canada have largely failed in the past, several key factors—changing national demographics, high rates of youth participation in soccer, and groups of willing investors—have altered the landscape, contributing to the formation of the CPL. As traditional television and sports viewing shifts towards streaming providers, the CPL's presence on OneSoccer, a digital platform, endows it with increased authenticity and a more loyal following, particularly as the league is targeting younger "digital natives." Supporters' groups, which enrich fan culture and engagement, are also a key ingredient of the upstart league. The CPL is being promoted as an authentic Canadian product, as seen with team names reflecting local or regional identities and Canadian player quotas that enhance the league's national *bone fides* on the pitch.

## Lay Summary

For decades, Canada was the biggest economy in the world without a top-tier, national professional soccer league. But the launch of the Canadian Premier League (CPL), an exclusively Canadian professional soccer league, in April 2019 made it the first top-tier sports league in North America to begin operations in the modern digital era. The CPL represents a unique and timely opportunity to examine how a new professional sports league cultivates ties with fan-consumers via sport nationalism, digital media, and fandom. There are relatively few academic publications on the formation of professional sports leagues (old and new), and there are even fewer scholarly works on the CPL. Despite being the world's most popular sport, soccer has traditionally taken a back seat to hockey in the Canadian sporting scene. While professional soccer leagues in Canada have generally struggled in the past, several key factors—changing national demographics, high rates of youth participation in soccer, and groups of willing investors—have altered the landscape, contributing to the formation of the CPL. As traditional television and sports viewing shifts towards streaming providers, the CPL's presence on OneSoccer, a digital platform, endows it with increased authenticity and a more loyal following, particularly as the league is targeting a younger audience. Supporters' groups, which enrich fan culture and engagement, are also a key component of the upstart league. The CPL is being promoted as an authentic Canadian product, as seen with team names reflecting local or regional identities, and domestic player quotas that give the league a strong, distinct Canadian flavour.

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## Introduction

### **Background**

Soccer has historically been on the fringe of mainstream Canadian sporting culture, but a new era has started to emerge. In May 2017, the Canadian Premier League (CPL) was officially sanctioned by the Canadian Soccer Association—the sport’s national governing body—making it the top-tier, national domestic professional soccer league in Canada. The CPL’s inaugural season launched in April 2019 with seven teams from five of Canada’s ten provinces. Initially, the league expected eight teams to take part in its first season; however, the now-defunct Ottawa Fury Football Club decided to continue playing in the US-based United Soccer League.<sup>1</sup> This left the CPL with little time to find a replacement, and the league pressed ahead with the following teams: HFX Wanderers Football Club (Halifax, NS), York United Football Club (York Region, ON),<sup>2</sup> Forge Football Club (Hamilton, ON), Valour Football Club (Winnipeg, MB), Cavalry Football Club (Calgary, AB), Pacific Football Club (Langford, BC), and Football Club Edmonton (AB).<sup>3</sup> During its inaugural season that ran from April to October 2019, the CPL adopted a split season (fall and spring) format unfamiliar in North American sport circles, but popular in many South American soccer leagues.<sup>4</sup> Each team was slated to play 28 games,

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start after filling void for players and fans,” *SportBusiness*, November 6, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> York United FC was initially unveiled as York9 FC in May 2018, but it rebranded as York United FC in December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the CPL welcomed its first expansion team, as Atlético Ottawa joined ahead of the league’s second season. Atlético Ottawa is owned by the Spanish club, Club Atlético de Madrid.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Davis, “Canadian Premier League: How do you start a brand new professional league?” *BBC*, February 1, 2019.

subsequently culminating in a two-legged final between the winners of the two halves of the season.<sup>5</sup> Unusually for a North American sports league, there were no playoffs. But, how did the CPL come to fruition? What are the factors that led to its formation and how can the league be successful?

## **Research Problem**

Launching a new professional sports league can be a ground-breaking and exciting venture, but it is far from a straightforward task. Broadly speaking, the process involves identifying gaps in a country's sporting landscape and determining ways in which to resolve these gaps. That sounds simple enough, but in truth, it is a mammoth undertaking. This explains why many upstart leagues in Canada have faced disappointment in their quest to establish themselves. While there are relatively few scholarly works on the formation of professional sports leagues (old and new), previous research indicates several reoccurring factors tend to contribute to a league's inability to survive. These include: ownership instability, lack of national television coverage, minimal audience appeal, high player salaries, and difficulty getting corporate sponsorships.<sup>6</sup> Yet, there remains a dearth of research on how to successfully create a new professional sports league, which is also the case for the CPL. Since the most recent launch of a top-tier, professional sports league in North America was in 1996 when Major League

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<sup>5</sup> Since Cavalry FC won both halves of the 2019 season, a contingency was implemented which awarded the second finalist berth to the team with the second-best overall record (Forge FC). Forge FC defeated Cavalry FC 2-0 on aggregate over the two-legged final, becoming the first-ever CPL champion.

<sup>6</sup> Jack O. Gaylord Jr. and David L. Groves, "Factors in the Formation and Development of Professional Sports Leagues," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 53.



Soccer (MLS) began play, this research represents a timely opportunity to explore the factors that led to the formation of the CPL.

## **Research Approach**

The research framework uses a qualitative intrinsic case study design to examine how the CPL, an upstart professional sports league, cultivated ties with fan-consumers via sport nationalism, digital media, and fandom. A case study is a research design that is regularly used in a wide range of disciplines, most often in the social sciences. It is a detailed study of a specific topic, in which the researcher uses a variety of data collection procedures.<sup>7</sup> Rather than linking case studies to the idea of testing preconceived theories, this research design aims to magnify the specific subject matter being examined.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, leads to a deeper, more expansive understanding of the research topic. The primary goal here involves learning about the case itself, which in turn helps enhance both the researcher and readers' understanding of the subject matter at hand.<sup>9</sup> It is an appropriate research design when seeking to gain in-depth, contextualized knowledge about a real-world subject, such as the formation of the CPL.

As with all research designs, case studies have their benefits and limitations. One key advantage of case studies is that it allows researchers to engage in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. On the other hand, case study research has also been critiqued at times for lacking rigour and providing little ground for generalization. This latter point is typified by

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<sup>7</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Gerd Ridder, "The theory contribution of case study research designs," *Business Research* 10 (February 2017): 288-289.

<sup>9</sup> Ridder, "The theory contribution," 288-289.

the focus of this approach on a single case, which makes it understandably more challenging for the research to reach generalized conclusions.

The two qualitative methods used to collect data in this research are: semi-structured interviews; and various primary and secondary sources, most often textual. Semi-structured interviews allow a certain degree of flexibility for the researcher to gather open-ended data from interviewees while exploring a particular topic thoroughly. For the purpose of this research, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviewees included CPL and Canadian Soccer Association officials, and soccer reporters. The study also incorporates information from a variety of sources. These include scholarly publications from a range of disciplines, chief among them sports sociology and marketing. As well, this study draws on reports and news articles to further complement the work.

It is important to note that the scope of the research is limited to the league's inaugural season in 2019. As a result, the Covid-19 pandemic-affected seasons of 2020 and 2021 are generally not covered. Furthermore, this study focuses mainly on men's soccer in Canada, since the topic of discussion is the launch of the CPL, a professional *men's* league.

## **Chapter Structure**

The first chapter examines how the CPL fills a certain void in the Canadian sporting landscape. It starts by providing background on Canadian sporting culture and highlights how soccer—the world's most popular team sport—has historically remained on the margins of the Canadian sporting landscape. That is partly due to the absence of a top-tier, national domestic professional soccer league, which in turn, contributed to the decades-long struggles of the men's national soccer team. The chapter provides an historical overview of prior, now-defunct, professional soccer leagues in Canada. While hockey has long been the focal point of Canadian

sport nationalism, soccer's popularity is undeniably on the rise. The sport's global nature, changing patterns of immigration, and sky-high youth participation rates have contributed to the growing appetite for soccer in Canada. Despite various warnings against the viability of a top-tier professional league, the Canadian Soccer Association and private investor groups nonetheless began to lay the groundwork for the Canadian Premier League, beginning in the mid-2010s.

The second chapter considers whether an upstart national league can broaden its appeal to viewers using a little-known, paywalled streaming service called OneSoccer. The CPL is the first top-tier, professional sports league in North America to begin operations in the modern digital era, a period when audiences—particularly younger generations—are growing more accustomed to livestreaming sporting events. This chapter discusses declining rates of traditional television subscriptions and explains why users are cutting the cord and switching to digital streaming services. Just as Netflix proved to be a disruptive innovator, ultimately defeating Blockbuster, the digital streaming service landscape continues to grow at the expense of traditional television. However, accessing broad segments of the population remains a challenge for digital streaming services. With most CPL matches only available via the specialty streaming service OneSoccer, the dilemma facing the league involves how it can move from the low-subscription margins of OneSoccer viewership to the mainstream of the Canadian sporting landscape and become a household name over time.

The third chapter examines the roles played by fans and supporters' groups in the sporting culture of the CPL, with an emphasis on local identity. The chapter begins by asking what it means to be a sports fan and explains the concepts of fanship, fandom, and team identification. Research shows that being part of a fan community is not just about supporting a

team. It is also about acquiring a sense of belonging. The importance of rivalries in fan culture is also discussed. The chapter then explains the significance of locality for fan communities. Teams can emphasize their local roots by promoting homegrown players in their squads and adopting locally resonant team names. The CPL has also implemented a strict player quota for Canadian nationals, a provision that guarantees the league a strong Canadian flavour. Finally, the chapter looks at the influential roles that supporters' groups have played in building up the CPL.

## **Chapter 1: Sport Nationalism**

For decades, Canadian soccer players did not have the consistent opportunity to play domestically at the professional level, effectively stunting the growth of the sport in the country. Without the necessary professional opportunities for young Canadians, the men's national team has performed poorly from the 1960s until very recently. The launch of a top-tier, national domestic soccer league was long overdue, as it enables these athletes to play professionally on home soil and creates a long-awaited pipeline of homegrown talent in support of the national team. Yet, unlike many countries around the world, Canada is not known as a soccer-loving nation. The Canadian professional sports landscape includes seven National Hockey League franchises, a Major League Baseball team (Toronto Blue Jays), a National Basketball Association team (Toronto Raptors), nine teams in the Canadian Football League, as well as three Canadian-based Major League Soccer teams. The Canadian Premier League (CPL) faces a significant challenge navigating this heavily crowded sports market, especially since some of these leagues have existed for more than a century and are well-known entities. In fact, it might take several years for the CPL to gain a foothold in the Canadian sports market.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Canadian sport nationalism has historically revolved around hockey, which represents another obstacle for the CPL to overcome. For it to do so, it must first heed the warning of a long line of professional soccer leagues that have failed in Canada. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the theme of Canadian sport nationalism and examine the prior context of professional soccer in Canada, while also analyzing specific factors that gave rise to the CPL.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Leach, "Canadian Premier League takes formative steps with open tryouts," *Sportsnet*, October 10, 2018.

## Soccer's Global Impact

As a sport, soccer's worldwide popularity and the passion and fanaticism it evokes among global and local audiences is simply unmatched. Its immense appeal can be partly attributed to the sport's ability to bring together people of various nations, cultures, races, and ethnicities. No other sport possesses an impact as considerable or as comparable. With annual revenues in the billions, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)—the governing body of the sport—reported in 2019 that there were at least 128,983 professional players and 3,903 professional clubs in existence around the world, operating in more than 200 countries.<sup>11</sup> FIFA currently has 211 member associations, which is 18 more than the number of United Nations member states. Moreover, FIFA's flagship tournament, the World Cup, is ten times bigger than the Olympic games in terms of popularity and viewership.<sup>12</sup> The 2018 World Cup was watched by a record 3.5 billion people in 2018, when the competition was hosted by Russia. For context, that is more than half of the world's entire population.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, soccer is the most popular sport in 226 countries worldwide. In fact, there are only 35 countries where soccer is not the dominant national sport, with Canada being one of them.<sup>14</sup> In 2018, 205 countries had top-tier, national domestic leagues, with the only exceptions being Liechtenstein, Mali, Montserrat, Sierra Leone, Yemen, and Canada.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> FIFA, *Professional Football Report 2019* (2019), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Joe Kidwell, "226 countries can't be wrong," *Bleacher Report*, November 14, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> FIFA, *2018 FIFA World Cup: Global Broadcast and Audience Summary* (2018), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Kidwell, "226 countries."

<sup>15</sup> FIFA, *Professional Football*, 4.

## Hockey's Status in Canada

A national sport is generally regarded as an intrinsic aspect of a nation's culture. In Canada, hockey is more than a sport. In 1994, the National Sports of Canada Act received royal assent, making hockey and lacrosse the country's two official national sports. Hockey is a sport that Canadians invented, and it has become a powerful national symbol—a true marker of Canadian identity.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Canada is the only country in the world where hockey is *the de facto* national sport. While hockey holds an important place in some European countries, like Russia, Sweden and Finland, it is not *the* national sport. In the US, hockey is only the fourth most popular team sport, and it lags behind the likes of golf and NASCAR in terms of viewership and attendance. Canada's national sport is not only unique but is also one that does not matter to most of the rest of the world nearly as much it does to Canadians.<sup>17</sup>

On the men's side, Canada has won 27 Ice Hockey World Championships, 18 International Ice Hockey Federation World Junior Championships, and 9 Olympic gold medals, among other successes.<sup>18</sup> Evidently, Canada has long prided itself at being the world's leading hockey country, which is partly why hockey has long been seen as Canadians' only real way of expressing sporting nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Canadian athletes and teams have achieved success in other

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<sup>16</sup> Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 123.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Anderson, "Sport and Leisure in Post-Confederation Canada," in *Canadian History: Post-Confederation*, by John Douglas Belshaw (BCcampus, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> The Canadian women's national hockey team has won 11 International Ice Hockey Federation Championships and 5 Olympic gold medals, among other successes.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Milton, "A 'New' Canadian nationalism through sport," *Hamilton Spectator*, June 23, 2017.

sports. For instance, Barbara Ann Scott—one of Canada's most legendary figure skaters—was a four-time national champion, two-time World champion, and 1948 Olympic gold medalist in ladies' singles. However, figure skating's lack of widespread appeal on the global stage meant it was difficult for Canadians to truly channel their national pride into a sport with only limited international impact.<sup>20</sup> The Toronto Blue Jays also won successive Major League Baseball championships in 1992 and 1993—a remarkable achievement—although the feat was accomplished through the use of mostly American players.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, when Toronto Football Club became the first Canadian franchise to win the Major League Soccer championship in 2017, it did so with a predominantly non-Canadian cast of players. The same can be said for the Toronto Raptors when the team secured its first-ever National Basketball Association title in 2019.

Canada's high standing in hockey has faced challenges from the US and some European countries, starting in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Even though the Montreal Canadiens remained the NHL's dominant team, winning eleven championships from 1953 to 1971, Canada's amateur hockey players struggled at international tournaments during this period.<sup>23</sup> (The rules for international competitions stipulated that only amateurs were permitted to compete, with professional athletes barred from playing. In truth, however, the Soviet players' "amateur" status was only in name, as

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<sup>20</sup> Milton, "A 'New Canadian nationalism.'"

<sup>21</sup> Alan Bairner, "Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: Relevance, Impact, Consequences," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences*, no. 49 (2008): 45.

<sup>22</sup> Bairner, *European and North American Perspectives*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Paikin, "'More to it than just hockey': Revisiting the Summit Series, 48 years later," *TVO*, January 13, 2021.



they were an elite team who played hockey full-time in their country.)<sup>24</sup> With the Soviet Union having become the dominant global force in international amateur competition by the 1960s, Canada sought to reassert itself by organizing an eight-game exhibition series against the Soviets in 1972, known as the Summit Series.<sup>25</sup> The series elicited intense feelings of nationalism in both countries, particularly as it took place during the Cold War. The Canadian team was represented by NHL players, and there was a general expectation that Canada would cruise to victory. However, it took Canada until the final 34 seconds of the last game to overcome the Soviets, as Paul Henderson scored the series-winning goal—an iconic moment in Canadian sports history.<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite the glory, there was a realization that Canada was beginning to face new competition in hockey from other countries.<sup>27</sup>

At the 1998 Winter Olympics in Japan, the Canadian team, led by Wayne Gretzky, failed to collect a medal, plunging the nation into a state of despair.<sup>28</sup> The disappointment was a bruising one for Canada's sporting identity, although it also continued to demonstrate how hockey remained the focal point of Canadian sport nationalism.<sup>29</sup> While hockey has largely remained Canada's national sporting pastime, the professional side of the sport has turned into more than just a Canadian game. In the 1980s, Canadians constituted more than 75 per cent of

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<sup>24</sup> John Soares, "Cold War, Hot Ice: International Ice Hockey, 1947-1980," *Journal of Sport History* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 208.

<sup>25</sup> Paikin, "More to it."

<sup>26</sup> Paikin, "More to it."

<sup>27</sup> Bairner, *European and North American Perspectives*, 132-133.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Keating, "Hockey is more than a game to Canadians," *Reuters*, January 28, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Soares, "Cold War, Hot Ice," 214.

the players in the NHL, but by 1998, that number had shrunk to 61 per cent. By 2018, Canadians made up only 45 per cent of NHL players. While Canada remains the most well-represented country in the NHL, the league is projected to become more American—for the first time ever—by 2028.<sup>30</sup>

## **Importance of Sport**

Over the last three decades, the Canadian sport nationalism landscape gradually expanded. This trend coincided with the Government of Canada investing record sums of money in high performance sport.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Canada has successfully hosted major sporting competitions, like the 2007 FIFA U-20 World Cup, the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup and the 2015 Pan-Am Games in Toronto. Canada will also co-host the 2026 FIFA World Cup alongside the US and Mexico. Hosting sporting events provides a unique opportunity for Canadian athletes to compete on home soil and showcase themselves to the nation and the rest of the world. In addition, it plays a role in strengthening the amateur sport system and helps promote national unity by demonstrating the country's sporting prowess to the outside world.<sup>32</sup> Besides boosting tourism, hosting sporting competitions also provides cultural, economic and community benefits, such as capital and infrastructure investments, including the construction of facilities that can continue to be used by the local population for years after.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cork Gaines and Mike Nudelman, "The NHL is on pace to have more American players than Canadian players in 11 years," *Business Insider*, November 18, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Andreja Milasincic, "Winter Sport Nationalism: The Canadian Olympic Press from Calgary 1988 to Vancouver 2010" (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2017), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Bairner, "Relevance, Impact Consequences," 45.

<sup>33</sup> Government of Canada, *Federal Policy for hosting international sport events*, 2021.

There is also a recognition that successful performance in elite-level sports can encourage Canadians to participate in sports and recreation, furthering health promotion and national pride.<sup>34</sup> At the 2010 Winter Olympics, both the Canadian men and women’s national hockey teams beat the US in their gold medal games, with Sidney Crosby’s golden goal in overtime becoming another iconic moment in Canadian sports history. The Canadian women’s national soccer team’s consecutive bronze medal finishes at the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics also sparked nationalistic passion, particularly as the US were seen as the “villains” in 2012.<sup>35</sup> Further affirmation of Canadian sport nationalism came at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo when the women’s national team won the gold medal for the first time ever, defeating Sweden on penalties.

### **Struggles of the Men’s National Soccer Team**

Nations derive prestige from not only hosting major sporting events but also from being successful in sport. This is particularly the case with global sports, like soccer, which can help promote the image of a nation on the world stage.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, Canada’s accomplishments in men’s soccer have historically been meagre, with the program reaching its nadir in 2012 after being walloped 8-1 by Honduras despite only needing a draw to advance to the next round of World Cup qualifying. In 2014, the Canadian men’s national team was ranked 122<sup>nd</sup> in FIFA’s world soccer rankings—its lowest position ever. Even micro nations like St. Kitts and Nevis

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<sup>34</sup> Milasincic, “Winter Sport Nationalism,” 19-20.

<sup>35</sup> Milton, “A 'New' Canadian nationalism.”

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, “Sport and Leisure.”

placed above Canada.<sup>37</sup> Before 2022, Canada’s only appearance at the FIFA World Cup came in 1986, when the country was eliminated in the competition’s group stage without earning a point or scoring a goal. Canada’s absence from the World Cup spanned more than 35 years. Similarly, the national team—albeit a mostly U-23 squad—has failed to qualify for the Olympic Games for almost four decades. Since 1948, Canada competed only twice in the Olympics, in 1976 and 1984. The men’s national soccer team has enjoyed only limited success during these decades. As noted above, Canada qualified for the 1986 World Cup by winning the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) Championship in 1985, the biennial continental tournament between North American countries. Canada’s victory then was described as “the greatest triumph in Canadian soccer history.”<sup>38</sup> In 1990, the competition was restructured and rebranded as the CONCACAF Gold Cup. A decade later, Canada shocked the soccer world by winning the 2000 Gold Cup, despite only qualifying for the competition’s playoffs by virtue of winning a coin-toss tiebreaker.

Nevertheless, these sporadic triumphs, until very recently, have failed to produce consistent success for the Canadian men’s national team. For many decades, Canada’s soccer program was an abject failure. There were systemic problems on many fronts: the Canadian Soccer Association’s haphazard leadership; inadequate coaching standards; and a lack of proper investment and infrastructure in the sport. As well, the absence of a top-tier, national domestic soccer league factored greatly. When Canada qualified for the 1986 World Cup, it did so with a

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<sup>37</sup> “Men’s Ranking,” FIFA, October 23, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> “That one time Canada made it to the World Cup,” *CBC*, July 6, 2018.

shallow talent pool to draw from and a virtually non-existent development system.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Canada's qualification to the 1986 World Cup was quite an oddity given the fact it did not have its own national domestic professional league. The lack of a top-tier national stage consistently harmed the men's national team prospects by creating a chasm between youth levels of the game and the national team.

### **History of "Professional" Soccer in Canada**

Until recently, the history of professional soccer in Canada can be described as scattered and regional, with prior leagues being "professional" and "national" in name only. In 2005, the Toronto Star's Dave Perkins wrote: "For whatever reasons, pro soccer, which has been tried a million times, doesn't go here."<sup>40</sup> Several factors account for this. First, the slower pace of the sport and its infrequent goals make it less engaging for Canadians, more accustomed to the faster pace of sports like hockey and basketball. Soccer historian Colin Jose explains: "You have to concentrate on what you're watching. There are no natural breaks [in soccer]."<sup>41</sup> Another factor is the country's vast geography and dispersed population centres, which make operating a national league more expensive. Canada's harsh winters limit the outdoor playing season, while scant investment in playing facilities has produced further constraints.<sup>42</sup> The lack of funding in the Canadian soccer system, a win-at-all-costs youth competition system, and the Canadian Soccer Association's (CSA) governance structure also produced a sub-par player development system.

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<sup>39</sup> Steve Keating, "Soccer: Canada gets a league of its own with CPL launch," *Reuters*, April 26, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> MacDonald, "Canadian pro soccer."

<sup>41</sup> Colin Campbell, "Why we don't watch soccer," *Society, Maclean's*, July 22, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Easton, Rockerbie, and Whittall, *In A League*, 6.

Aside from government grants, a meaningful share of the CSA's operating budget comes from player registration fees, via the provincial associations it oversees. In 2015, Jason deVos, current director of development at the CSA, highlighted the flaws with this approach: “Because of this, the tail wags the dog when it comes to player development. The provinces, rather than the CSA, hold all the power. The provinces do what their districts want them to do; the districts do what their clubs want them to do; and the clubs do what their customers want them to do – which is rarely what is in the best interests of player development.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the win-at-all-costs approach in Canadian youth soccer led many underqualified coaches to rely on athletes with physical attributes like size, speed and strength instead of instilling the fundamental skills that young players need to properly thrive at the highest levels of the sport.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, coaches within Canada’s national soccer program generally selected more physically developed, athletic players rather than the more skillful, technical players—who often need more time to develop—in hopes of achieving instant success. This short-term thinking was practically forced upon Canadian national team coaches, as their budgets were at risk of being cut if they failed to qualify for major international competitions, like the World Cup and Olympics.<sup>45</sup>

One of the earliest “national” leagues was the six-team Interprovincial Professional Football Association, which formed in Ontario and Quebec in 1913; however, by the end of the year, only four teams remained. The league renamed itself the Eastern Football League in the

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<sup>43</sup> Jason deVos, “Apathy toward Canadian soccer is why nothing is going to change,” *TSN*, January 22, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> deVos, “Apathy toward Canadian soccer.”

<sup>45</sup> Peter Kennedy, “Canadian rejection spurred player to top,” *Globe and Mail*, May 30, 2002.

autumn of 1913 but went defunct a year later.<sup>46</sup> In the 1920s, there were two short-lived leagues—the Inter-City League and the Inter-Provincial League. In 1926, the National Soccer League (NSL) was created and two years later, it merged with the Inter-Provincial League, while retaining the NSL name. In truth though, it was more of a regional league since most of its teams were based in Ontario and Quebec.<sup>47</sup> In 1930, the Pacific Coast League was formed in western Canada. (It remained in existence until 1973 when it merged with the Inter-City and Mainland leagues to create the BC Soccer League).<sup>48</sup> In 1961, the Eastern Canada Professional Soccer League was formed, which was another exclusively Ontario and Quebec-based league; however, it ceased operations in 1966.<sup>49</sup> This fragmented pattern would continue for more than four decades.

### **League Mortality**

The following section will analyze the formation and demise of three professional soccer leagues: North American Soccer League (1968-1984), Canadian Soccer League (1987-1992), and Canadian Professional Soccer League (1998-2014).

#### North American Soccer League

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<sup>46</sup> Colin Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia of Soccer: Keeping Score* (Vaughan, ON: Soccer Hall of Fame and Museum, 1998), 109.

<sup>47</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 110-111.

<sup>48</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 112.

The North American Soccer League (NASL) launched in 1968, with teams located in both Canada and the United States.<sup>50</sup> In Canada, the NASL had teams in Toronto (1968-1984), Vancouver (1968-1984), Montreal (1971-1983), Edmonton (1979-1982) and Calgary (1981) at various points during its existence. The league's most prominent franchise, the New York Cosmos, signed a slew of legendary players, starting with Pele in 1975. Giorgio Chinaglia joined in 1976, and one year later, Franz Beckenbauer and Carlos Alberto Torres were also recruited to the Cosmos. In order to compete, other NASL teams felt obliged to attract global superstars by spending lavishly, turning the situation into a financial arms race.<sup>51</sup> The likes of Johan Cryuff, Eusebio, George Best, Gerd Müller, Geoff Hurst, Gordon Banks, and Bobby Moore all joined the league, which attracted significant media attention and widespread interest in the league. While the NASL's popularity peaked in the late 1970s, there was also a downside, as Ted Howard, the league's former executive director, noted: "Pele had come and now there was all of this excitement and people had to get players, and they overpaid for them."<sup>52</sup>

There were underlying financial problems with this approach, as teams were spending, on average, 70 per cent of their budgets on player salaries. In comparison, National Football League teams devoted only 40 per cent of their budgets to player salaries in 1980.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the NASL was expanding rapidly, rising from nine clubs in 1973 to twenty in 1975. This expansion

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<sup>50</sup> Ted Westervelt, "Banging Your Head Against The Wall For 115 Years Hurts," *Bleacher Report*, July 28, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> James J. Zhang and Brenda G. Pitts, *The Global Football Industry: Marketing Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 20.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, "How the birth and death."

<sup>53</sup> Zhang and Pitts, *The Global Football Industry*, 20.



strategy was not fiscally sustainable, given that the league's average attendance was under 15,000 per game, with some teams averaging less than 5,000 fans a game. With dwindling attendance, low television viewership and disappearing network television contracts, revenues became scarce.<sup>54</sup> As the NASL became more cash-strapped and desperate, anyone willing to pay the franchise fee for an expansion team was permitted to join the league. The league office's lack of oversight and control was quite apparent, as many incoming owners had very little knowledge of the sport.<sup>55</sup> As well, many NASL teams played on sub-par playing surfaces, often reconfigured baseball diamonds or football fields, which made for makeshift, hard pitches with odd geometric dimensions. The league did not recognize that soccer-specific venues were better suited for generating authentic, soccer-friendly atmospheres for supporters.<sup>56</sup> The NASL faced a collective deficit of approximately USD \$30 million in each of 1980 and 1981, and all of its teams were losing money.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, several teams folded, and in 1984, the league ceased operations.<sup>58</sup>

### Canadian Soccer League

In 1987, following the collapse of the NASL, another attempt was made to launch a professional soccer league, although this time it was a Canadian-based one. On this occasion, the

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<sup>54</sup> Francis and Zheng, "Learning Vicariously From Failure," 552.

<sup>55</sup> Zhang and Pitts, *The Global Football Industry*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> "Some Failures Of the N.A.S.L.," *New York Times*, November 27, 1983.

<sup>57</sup> Chris Baker, "Soccer: Is it still the sport of the 80s?" *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1981.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Lewis, "How the birth and death of the NASL changed soccer in America forever," *Guardian*, October 20, 2018.

Canadian Soccer League (CSL) was formed, and it operated as the country's nationally licensed, Division I professional soccer league.<sup>59</sup> Given the previous failures, the organizers took a more cautious approach, relying largely on existing teams from provincial leagues, while implementing a salary cap of \$300,000 per team.<sup>60</sup> During the inaugural season, the league consisted of two four-team divisions. In the West Division, there were: Calgary Kickers, Edmonton Brickmen, Vancouver 86ers, and Winnipeg Fury. The East Division was comprised of: National Capital Pioneers, Hamilton Steelers, Toronto Blizzard, and the North York Rockets.<sup>61</sup> Initially, there was optimism, with the CSL described as "the first attempt to form a truly national soccer league in Canada."<sup>62</sup> However, soon after, it encountered significant financial difficulties due to travel expenses and declining spectatorship.<sup>63</sup> Average player salaries were a paltry \$7,500 per season, but even so, teams still struggled financially.<sup>64</sup>

Even the league's most successful organization, the Vancouver 86ers, which consistently led the league in attendance, could not escape money problems. After making a small profit of \$580 in 1987, the team posted four consecutive years of losses: \$80,469 (1988), \$49,280 (1989), \$147,078 (1990), and \$56,718 (1991)—totalling \$333,545. As the CBC's Barry McDonald said in 1992, "[it is] small wonder the league is in dire straights when its model franchise can't get

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<sup>59</sup> Archie McDonald, "Soccer rebirth," *Vancouver Sun*, February 26, 1987.

<sup>60</sup> McDonald, "Soccer rebirth."

<sup>61</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 113.

<sup>63</sup> Jose, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 113.

<sup>64</sup> Barry MacDonal, "Canadian pro soccer in jeopardy," *CBC*, June 8, 1992.

out of the red.”<sup>65</sup> With financial problems mounting and declining attendance, several teams folded after the 1991 season. In 1992, Bob Lenarduzzi—a former Canadian international player and coach who also managed the Vancouver 86ers—warned that the league was in dire financial straits. He added that “if we’d had more business type owners, I think they would have been a little more realistic and teams would’ve lost less money as a result.”<sup>66</sup> Left with only six teams in 1992, the CSL went defunct in 1993, leaving Canada without a top-tier, national domestic soccer league once again.

### Canadian Professional Soccer League

In 1998, the Canadian Professional Soccer League (CPSL) was formed, starting with an all-Ontario division in 1998.<sup>67</sup> The CPSL’s eight founding members were: London City, Toronto Croatia, St. Catharines Wolves, North York Astros, Glen Shields, Mississauga Eagles, Toronto Olympians, and York Region Shooters.<sup>68</sup> From a player development perspective, the CPSL was designed as “a stepping-stone to the next level.”<sup>69</sup> It aimed to become the country’s Division II, multi-provincial—and eventually—national professional soccer league. Its goal was to follow the Canadian Hockey League’s (CHL) blueprint as an umbrella organization. At the time, the

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<sup>65</sup> MacDonald, “Canadian pro soccer.”

<sup>66</sup> MacDonald, “Canadian pro soccer.”

<sup>67</sup> Bill Ault, “National Dream: The OSA's hopes for the CPSL are national,” *Ontario Soccer Association*, August 25, 1997.

<sup>68</sup> Kathy Rumleski, “Players, teams clamouring to be part of soccer league,” *London Free Press*, November 8, 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Robin Glover, “Nuke Soccer: The Vince Ursini Interview,” *Rocket Robin’s Soccer* in Toronto, August 23, 2004.

CHL had 54 Major Junior A teams in three separate conferences (Western Hockey League; Ontario Hockey League; Quebec Major Junior Hockey League) competing for a national title. Similarly, the CPSL’s vision was to create regional divisions, with the winner of each division competing in a traditional playoff format for the overall league championship.<sup>70</sup> However, the CPSL initially adopted an ultra-cautious approach in terms of expansion to ensure its survival. The league commissioner, Vince Ursini, highlighted this strategy when he said: “Several owners have been involved in different professional leagues over the last thirty years. They’ve seen the demise of all our predecessor leagues...our goal as a league has been viability, stability, longevity. And the only way we maintain that is by making sure we maintain high standards.”<sup>71</sup>

The Canadian Soccer Association considered strengthening the professional soccer structure in Canada by creating a two-tier system in 2001. Not coincidentally, this happened in the same year that former FIFA President Sepp Blatter sounded a note of caution during a visit to Toronto, warning: “You [Canada] must do something with your professional soccer... and you mustn’t count on the United States, [because] they have their own interests.”<sup>72</sup> The Canadian Soccer Association sought to create a domestic, Division I professional league, named the Canadian United Soccer League, by partnering with Canadian teams in the US-based United Soccer League (A-League), and by forging an alliance with the Canadian Professional Soccer League—which would be recognized as the Division II league in this setup.<sup>73</sup> However, the plan

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<sup>70</sup> Rumleski, “Players, teams.”

<sup>71</sup> Glover, “Nuke Soccer.”

<sup>72</sup> Canadian Soccer League, “A Much-Needed Stronger Professional Soccer Structure Not On The Horizon,” July 4, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Canadian Soccer League, “A Much-Needed.”

never came to fruition. Ursini later accused the national governing body of having “done little or nothing for professional soccer.”<sup>74</sup> Nick Bontis, president of the Canadian Soccer Association, refuted this notion: “A lot of people have [always] wanted professional soccer in Canada, but you’ve got to understand that it is not Canada Soccer’s [CSA] responsibility. Canada Soccer’s responsibility is to govern and grow the game, not to pay expansion fees and finance professional leagues—that is the role of private investors.”<sup>75</sup>

In 2005, Major League Soccer (MLS) expanded into Canada for the first time, awarding a franchise to Toronto, later named Toronto FC.<sup>76</sup> In 2006, the Canadian Professional Soccer League rebranded itself the Canadian Soccer League (CSL)—the same name as the previous league that went defunct. In 2010, the CSL was awarded full membership in the Canadian Soccer Association and became sanctioned as the Division III professional league in the Canadian soccer pyramid.<sup>77</sup> By this point, MLS had effectively gained Division I status in Canada, while the United Soccer League First Division, which succeeded the A-League, had become the Division II level. The CSL was basically identified as the missing bridge between the amateur and top-tier professional level in the Canadian soccer system.

### Match-Fixing Scandal and Subsequent De-Sanctioning

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<sup>74</sup> Glover, “Nuke Soccer.”

<sup>75</sup> Nick Bontis, interview by author, via WhatsApp, June 2, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> CBC, “Major League Soccer on its way to Toronto,” October 28, 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Robin Glover, “CSL Granted Full National Membership, will become a more significant part of Canada's pro soccer,” Rocket Robin’s Soccer in Toronto, February 13, 2010.

In 2012, the CBC reported that the Canadian Soccer League was mired in a match-fixing and illegal betting scandal involving a European crime syndicate.<sup>78</sup> (Match-fixing is the illegal manipulation of a sports match through a variety of methods, including player bribery.) It is fair to wonder how this could have occurred in Canada, which ranked as the tenth least corrupt country in the world at the time, according to Transparency International.<sup>79</sup> Since the CSL was a little-known league, the criminal activity went initially undetected by Canadian sports authorities and law enforcement agencies. Another factor was that the league's players were generally poorly paid, with some only making around \$5,000 per season, making players more susceptible to bribery. The CBC reported that in a 2009 match between the Trois-Rivières Attak and Toronto Croatia, a bribe of €15,000 was paid to some Toronto Croatia players to intentionally lose the game. Toronto Croatia lost 4-1, despite being one of the best teams in the league.<sup>80</sup> This match-fixing affair became one of the biggest corruption scandals to hit professional soccer in Canada. Francesco Baranca, the secretary general of Federbet—an anti-match fixing European organization—subsequently lambasted the league, calling the CSL “a disaster.”<sup>81</sup> At a later Integrity in Sport conference, Interpol revealed that between 2010 and 2013, approximately \$100 million had been wagered on CSL matches using legitimate betting houses.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ben Rycroft, Alex Shprintsen, and Joseph Loiero, “Exclusive: Canadian soccer an easy target for match-fixing,” *CBC*, September 12, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Declan Hill, “Semi-pro Canadian Soccer League a hotspot of match-fixing,” *Toronto Star*, December 12, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Rycroft, Shprintsen, and Loiero, “Exclusive: Canadian soccer.”

<sup>81</sup> Hill, “Semi-pro Canadian.”

<sup>82</sup> Ben Rycroft, “CSA cuts ties with Canadian Soccer League,” *CBC*, January 31, 2013.

In February 2013, a few months after the CBC report, the Canadian Soccer Association decertified the Canadian Soccer League.<sup>83</sup> The league vowed to “take whatever action necessary to overturn the decision.”<sup>84</sup> In April 2013, the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) affirmed that “the Canadian Soccer Association had the legal authority to withdraw the sanction previously granted to the CSL,” but it asked the national governing body to delay the decertification until February 2014.<sup>85</sup> The CBC subsequently reported that the Canadian Soccer Association admitted that it was ill-equipped “to tackle the domestic match-fixing problem.”<sup>86</sup>

### **The Problem with Major League Soccer**

Without a successful national professional league, Canadian soccer players were left deprived of opportunities to showcase their abilities on home soil, leaving them with few options. Even the addition of Major League Soccer (MLS) franchises in Toronto (2007), Vancouver (2011) and Montreal (2012) failed to serve the interests of Canadian players. MLS is sanctioned by the United States Soccer Federation as it is a US-based league. Its rules allow each team to have eight “international” roster spots. When the league expanded to Canada in 2007, Canadian players were treated as “second-class citizens,” as they were designated “international” players if they played for an American MLS team. On the other hand, the rules stipulated that

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<sup>83</sup> Rycroft, “CSA cuts ties.”

<sup>84</sup> Dave Rowaan, “Canadian Soccer League De-Sanctioned, Will play in 2013,” *SB Nation: Waking the Red*, March 5, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Canadian Soccer League v. Canadian Soccer Association – Clarification of Award, 13-0194, (SDRCC 2013), 2.

<sup>86</sup> Rycroft, “CSA cuts ties.”

American players were always considered “domestic,” regardless of whether they played for Canadian or American teams.<sup>87</sup> This meant that Canadian players in MLS faced a massive disadvantage as they were competing for a limited number of international spots on American teams. In 2017, this issue was partially addressed, as Canadians were no longer classified as “international” players in the MLS, but only if they met certain criteria. Only those who i) joined a Canadian or American MLS club academy; or became a member of a Canadian approved youth club prior to turning 16, and ii) signed their first professional contract with an MLS team or their United Soccer League affiliate, became eligible to count as “domestic” players.<sup>88</sup> This small step was far too restrictive, since it still excluded most Canadian players from qualifying for “domestic” status in the MLS.

Another issue is the imbalanced representation that exists in the league. In 2016, even though Canadian teams made up 15 per cent of the MLS, Canadians represented just over 4 per cent of the league’s players.<sup>89</sup> Colin Miller—the former Canadian men’s national team player—echoed the need for change, arguing: “We need more Canadian pro franchises to give Canadian players a chance to play. I was interim Canadian head coach for nine games [in 2013], including at the [2013] CONCACAF Gold Cup, and seven of our Canadian national team players were unattached [with no contracts with pro clubs].”<sup>90</sup> Rather than truly present itself as a joint, cross-

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<sup>87</sup> Matthew Hall, “We’re second-class citizens’: why MLS in Canada benefits everyone except Canada,” *Guardian*, September 13, 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Marc Weber, “Some Canadian players granted domestic status in MLS; Generation adidas Canada created,” *Province*, November 30, 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Hall, “We’re second-class citizens.”

<sup>90</sup> Cleve Dheensaw, “Coach: More pro franchises the best way to ensure soccer success,” *Times Colonist*, June 28, 2014.



border league, the MLS remains an American league that simply happens to have a few Canadian teams in it. David Clanachan, former Canadian Premier League commissioner, reiterated this point: "The three MLS [Canadian] franchises have done a phenomenal job in bringing the game to the next level and teaching Canadians what the game could be like, but they are still seen as teams that operate in the American league. With no plans to expand, the MLS teams are not about Canadian players. They are not seen as being representative of Canadian soccer."<sup>91</sup>

### **Dual-Citizen Canadians**

The lack of opportunities for Canadians to showcase their abilities explains why many were forced to look for playing chances abroad or give up pursuing their dreams of becoming professional soccer players. David Edgar, the former Canadian national team player, explains: "All the top players would have to leave to go abroad, and a lot of talent went to waste because they couldn't get visas in certain countries or couldn't play in England due to their parents' background, so it was difficult. I was lucky as my parents were from Newcastle, and I could get a British passport, but others weren't as lucky."<sup>92</sup> Edgar's sentiment is shared by his former international teammate, Jim Brennan, who adds: "There was nothing when I was younger. A lot of good players that could have been professional didn't have the opportunity. I was fortunate to come to the UK and play. But a lot of young Canadians saw their dreams end early as there was nowhere to go."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Davis, "Canadian Premier League."

<sup>92</sup> Will Unwin, "First Canada beat the US. Now focus turns to the CPL final as soccer expands," *Guardian*, October 25, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Davis, "Canadian Premier League."

Unlike Edgar and Brennan, some talented Canadian players like Owen Hargreaves left the country's soccer scene for good. Despite being born and raised in Calgary, Hargreaves—a midfielder—was persistently overlooked by Canada's national soccer program while in his teens. After being spotted by Thomas Niendorf, a former East German coach residing in Canada, Hargreaves left for Germany and later joined Football Club Bayern München in 1997. When the Canadian Soccer Association came calling a few years later, Hargreaves turned down the opportunity to play on the national team, electing to represent England instead. (Hargreaves was eligible to play for England as his father was British.)<sup>94</sup> Hargreaves became something of a role model for other Canadian dual-national players who followed suit, such as goalkeeper Asmir Begovic.<sup>95</sup>

After fleeing war-torn Yugoslavia as a refugee, Begovic and his parents eventually settled in Edmonton in 1999. In 2004, Begovic secured a move to England, joining Portsmouth Football Club's youth academy. Unlike Hargreaves, Begovic was part of Canada's national soccer program, having represented the country at the U-17 and U-20 levels (including at the U-20 World Cup in 2007). Yet, despite receiving call-ups to the senior squad, Begovic never played in a national team match, which made him question his future and the direction of the national soccer program in Canada. In late 2009, Begovic made his international debut for Bosnia and Herzegovina, dashing the hopes of Canadian soccer fans. Begovic later said that he had patiently waited for an opportunity that never came and added: "Going forward, I just didn't see the future being that great for Canadian soccer. I wasn't sure if the people running it were the right

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<sup>94</sup> Kennedy, "Canadian rejection."

<sup>95</sup> Paul James, "Canada needs a soccer identity," *Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2010.

people.”<sup>96</sup> Begovic has played in the English Premier League for more than a decade, featuring for the likes of Stoke City Football Club, Chelsea Football Club and Association Football Club Bournemouth. His story was another example of the Canadian Soccer Association’s inability to convince eligible players with burgeoning reputations to play for the national team.

### **Growth of Soccer in Canada**

Changing patterns of immigration to Canada have altered the landscape of youth sport participation in the country. Some top sources of immigrants to Canada include Algeria, France, Colombia, Brazil, Russia, and the United Kingdom, where soccer is the most popular sport.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, soccer has become the preferred sport for many first-generation Canadians.<sup>98</sup> It also ranks as the most popular team sport among new citizens in Canada.<sup>99</sup> In fact, Statistics Canada estimates that by 2036, nearly half of the country’s population will consist of immigrants and second-generation Canadians.<sup>100</sup> The CPL’s first commissioner, David Clanachan, highlights this shift: “Growth is very equal from a gender perspective and football [soccer] is the fastest-growing sport among new immigrants too. People who come to the country may not know

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<sup>96</sup> Eoin O’Callaghan, “Upheaval motivated Asmir Begovic’s World Cup journey from Bosnia to Brazil, via Canada,” *Yahoo Sports*, June 9, 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Institute for Canadian Citizenship, *Playing Together: new citizens, sports & belonging* (2016), 13.

<sup>98</sup> Israel Fehr, “Soccer ranks as most popular team sport among Canadian youth according to study,” *Yahoo Sports*, June 11, 2014.

<sup>99</sup> *Playing Together*, 19-20.

<sup>100</sup> Statistics Canada, *Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036*, by Jean-Dominique Morency, Éric Caron Malenfant, and Samuel MacIsaac (January 25, 2017), 6.

basketball, hockey or NFL, but they know football [soccer].”<sup>101</sup> As a social institution, sport has the power to unite people, and soccer—given its global reach—is often a familiar social activity that can help newcomers integrate into Canadian society.

At the grassroots level, soccer is thriving. According to the 2014 Canadian Youth Sports Report, soccer was the number one team sport in the country for kids aged 3-17, with 767,000 children playing organized soccer in Canada. In comparison, only 531,000 were registered in ice hockey that year.<sup>102</sup> In fact, Canada ranked tenth in the world for youth soccer participation.<sup>103</sup> Many cite cost factors for this, with soccer being a more affordable option for parents than many other team sports. In 2017, Sportsnet’s Stephen Brunt addressed this point, stating: “The mass-youth-participation sport for children in this country is soccer and has been for decades. It’s simple. It’s cheap. It promotes fitness. It’s relatively safe. Perhaps as a result, viewing interest in the world game has shown a clear spike among Canadian millennials.”<sup>104</sup> However, high youth participation rates in recreational soccer do not necessarily translate into growing, tangible passion for the sport. In the US, there were only 50,000 children registered in organized soccer in 1967, but a decade later, that figure had skyrocketed to one million. Yet, the country’s professional soccer league at the time, the North American Soccer League, did not experience a similar boom and went defunct in 1984.<sup>105</sup> In Canada, however, soccer’s appeal is increasing on

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<sup>101</sup> Davis, “Canadian Premier League.”

<sup>102</sup> Solutions Research Group Consultants, *Canadian Youth Sports Report* (June 2014).

<sup>103</sup> Rethink Management Group, *In A League Of Our Own*, by James Easton, Duane Rockerbie, and Richard Whittall (July 2012), 6.

<sup>104</sup> Stephen Brunt, “Hockey And Our National Heartbeat,” *Sportsnet*, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Francis and Zheng, “Learning Vicariously From Failure,” 552.

a range of measurable fronts. Canadians bought more tickets than any other country that did not qualify for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, and over 29,000 tickets were purchased by Canadians for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil—again, the highest total for any non-competing nation.<sup>106</sup> In March 2016, a record-breaking attendance mark for a national team game on Canadian soil was set during the men's 2018 World Cup qualifying match against Mexico, when 54,798 people attended BC Place in Vancouver.<sup>107</sup>

### **The Easton Report**

The Rethink Management Report—commonly referred to as the Easton Report—was a study released in 2012, led by former Canadian national team player James Easton. The primary aim of the study was to examine the economic and logistical feasibility of creating a new national, Division II professional league, and to determine how the country's player development system could be improved to create a sustainable pathway for young Canadian soccer players to reach an elite level.<sup>108</sup>

The main takeaway from the report was that a new national Division II professional league would not be viable “due to a lack of suitable venues, competition from other leagues and uncertain consumer demand.”<sup>109</sup> In fact, the report conservatively estimated that a hypothetical

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<sup>106</sup> Charmaine Noronha, “O-!e Canada! Hockey homeland is mad for World Cup,” *Associated Press*, July 11, 2014.

<sup>107</sup> “Mexico dominates Canada 3-0 in World Cup soccer qualifying,” *Canadian Press*, March 25, 2016.

<sup>108</sup> “Canada Soccer Releases Report On Division II Soccer Viability in Canada,” Canadian Soccer Association, February 4, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Easton, Rockerbie, and Whittall, *In A League*, 18.

ten-team professional league in Canada would incur combined losses of more than \$10 million a season. The report noted that Australia’s top-tier professional league, the A-League which launched in 2005, had lost AUS \$47 million from 2010 to 2012. The report also noted that Major League Soccer had only recently become financially stable after operating for twenty years; it warned that “the continued operation of a professional league in Canada that utilizes existing playing venues would require investors who are willing to incur losses for a significant period of time.”<sup>110</sup>

Instead, the report proposed a new model of development at the semi-professional level. It recommended that the Canadian Soccer Association follow the Canadian Hockey League’s model of regional, semi-professional, development-focused leagues. These leagues would operate at a Division III level in Canada’s largest soccer markets, and the Canadian Soccer Association would rely on the provincial soccer associations to oversee them. This setup would provide players aged 18-23 with a more professional and structured environment, while also allowing them to compete at a higher level.<sup>111</sup> In 2012, the Première Ligue de soccer du Québec (PLSQ)—a Division III league—was launched in Quebec.<sup>112</sup> Soon after, League1 Ontario (L1O), another Division III provincial league, was founded in 2013. These leagues would enhance long-term player development in Canada while having the league's core group of players consisting of U-23 players.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Easton, Rockerbie, and Whittall, *In A League*, 15.

<sup>111</sup> Easton, Rockerbie, and Whittall, *In A League*, 19-20.

<sup>112</sup> “Retour d'une ligue semi-pro,” *Radio-Canada*, August 30, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> “OSA To Pilot Semi-Pro League1 Ontario In 2014-2015,” Ontario Soccer Association, November 15, 2013. In 2021, another provincial, semi-professional league called

## The Formation of the Canadian Premier League

Despite the Easton Report’s findings, the Canadian Soccer Association voiced support for a national domestic league in 2014: “Our National Team coaches do not have the benefit of selecting players who regularly compete in an elite level domestic league. The world’s top national teams draw from their domestic leagues. The development of a home-grown system in which our best players can compete is of paramount importance.”<sup>114</sup> The national governing body began consulting and engaging with a few ownership groups, including the Canadian Football League’s Hamilton Tiger-Cats, in order to assess the economic feasibility of creating a top-tier Canadian league.<sup>115</sup> Former Canadian Soccer Association President Victor Montagliani (currently president of CONCACAF) met with Scott Mitchell, the CEO of the Tiger-Cats, to consider the matter. According to former CPL Commissioner David Clanachan, “the story goes Scott gave Victor all the reasons why it wouldn’t work, and Victor replied, ‘OK, well tell me how you could make it work.’ Scott replied that the only way [of setting up a top-tier domestic soccer league] would be if every part of Canadian soccer was part of the process, starting at the top with Canada Soccer and going down to the provinces at grassroots level. And it went from there.”<sup>116</sup> In November 2016, the league hired its first official employee, naming Paul Beirne as

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League1 British Columbia (L1BC) was founded. In March 2022, it was announced that L1BC, L1O, and the PLSQ had formed a national alliance—League1 Canada—to collaborate as partner leagues and ensure a greater degree of alignment.

<sup>114</sup> Joshua Kloke, “Will the Canadian Premier League turn the country into a football power?” *Guardian*, April 30, 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Steve Milton, “Ticats involved in early days of new vision for Canadian soccer,” *Hamilton Spectator*, June 7, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start.”

its project manager. Beirne had been Toronto FC's first employee, playing a major role in the launch of that franchise.<sup>117</sup> Mitchell described Beirne as "one of the best soccer business executives in Canada. He's a very passionate guy about the Canadian concept and the opportunities for Canadian professional soccer."<sup>118</sup> (Beirne would later become president of the CPL in January 2018, before stepping down from his role after the league's inaugural season in 2019.)

A crucial part of the process was determining which potential ownership groups had deep-enough pockets and ties to their respective local communities, as well as viable stadium options. Many interested parties were ruled out of the bidding process due to these two stumbling blocks. The Canadian Premier League (CPL) required prospective ownership groups to have an undisclosed minimum net worth in order to be considered for a franchise license. The franchise fee for each of the league's inaugural seven teams was \$3 million.<sup>119</sup> (In comparison, a franchise license in the NFL, NBA or MLB would now be more than US\$2 billion.) The CPL's two founding teams, announced in 2017, were Forge FC (Hamilton) and Valour FC (Winnipeg). Both franchises were run by the respective owners of the Canadian Football League's (CFL) Hamilton Tiger-Cats and Winnipeg Blue Bombers, and the soccer teams would use the same stadiums as their CFL counterparts. Other notable CPL team owners include the Southern family (Cavalry FC), whose estate is worth \$2.3 billion; and Carlo Baldassarra (York United FC), founder of the

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<sup>117</sup> Steve Milton, "New Canadian pro soccer league makes major hire," *Hamilton Spectator*, November 15, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Milton, "New Canadian pro."

<sup>119</sup> Williams, "Canadian Premier League off to solid start."



Greenpark Group, one of Canada’s biggest real estate developers.<sup>120</sup> “We have been able to attract a very high level of investor in terms of net worth,” boasted Nick Bontis, president of the Canadian Soccer Association.<sup>121</sup> Despite being the most popular participatory sport in Canada, soccer is not the most commercially viable sport, which is “why it took a long time for a group of private investors to finally come together.”<sup>122</sup> Overcoming this hurdle proved vitally important in the formation of the league.

## **Conclusion**

With soccer’s popularity on the rise and hockey participation declining, soccer has the potential to challenge hockey as the most popular sport for Canadians. While hockey will likely remain a key part of Canadian national identity, the launch of the Canadian Premier League (CPL) represents a transformational moment in the Canadian sports landscape. However, for soccer to become ingrained in Canadian national identity, it needs the sort of magical moments that stir imagination and inspire a nation—like Henderson’s game-winning goal in the 1972 Summit Series or Crosby’s golden goal at the 2010 Winter Olympics. For the men’s national soccer team, these moments, until very recently, have been sorely lacking. Without a national domestic professional league, Canada has lagged behind the rest of the soccer world for decades. The formation of the CPL provides Canadian players with a clearer path to playing at the professional level, while cultivating a stronger professional soccer industry in Canada.

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<sup>120</sup> Edward Hon-Sing Wong, “Levelling the playing field,” *Briarpatch*, February 23, 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Bontis, interview.

<sup>122</sup> Bontis, interview.

## **Chapter 2: Digital Media**

On February 20, 2019, Canadian Soccer Business signed a ten-year, multi-million-dollar broadcasting rights agreement with Mediapro—a global media communications company based in Barcelona—worth a reported \$20 million per season.<sup>123</sup> (Canadian Soccer Business is an entity representing several core national soccer assets in Canada, including the Canadian Premier League.) Mediapro is a world leader in content creation and sports production, and in 2020, it recorded annual revenues of €1.1 billion.<sup>124</sup> All 100 Canadian Premier League (CPL) matches during the 2019 inaugural season would be available on Mediapro’s nascent over-the-top (OTT) streaming service, OneSoccer.<sup>125</sup> OTT streaming services, like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video—among others—are delivered to consumers over the Internet by third party content delivery services, rather than traditional multichannel television providers.<sup>126</sup> Twenty of these matches were also simulcast and available for free via the CBC’s website and its own OTT streaming service, CBC Gem. Ten of these twenty games were additionally broadcast on the CBC’s television network, although the network did not pay a rights fee or contribute to production costs.<sup>127</sup> However, the vast majority of available CPL games would require a paid subscription to OneSoccer. For decades, a subscription to a package offered by a traditional multichannel television provider was required for fans to legally watch live sports. But, sports

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<sup>123</sup> Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start.” All figures listed in Canadian Dollars unless otherwise noted.

<sup>124</sup> “Mediapro suffered €702m revenue hit in 2020,” *SportBusiness*, April 20, 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start.”

<sup>126</sup> Michael Strangelove, *Post-TV Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>127</sup> Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start.”

coverage is changing as OTT streaming services have gained more traction in recent years. The deal with Mediapro is the product of multiple factors, including: the disruption of OTT streaming services; the continued acceleration of cord cutting; the added value of sports OTT streaming services; a lack of interest among traditional networks; and the target audience of the league.

## **Pay-TV**

The pay television (or “pay-TV”) model is coming under severe pressure from disruptive innovation. Broadly speaking, pay-TV refers to subscription-based television services offered by traditional multichannel providers. The pay-TV business model requires consumers to subscribe to television packages and to rent or buy one or more pieces of equipment, like a set-top box or a satellite dish receiver.<sup>128</sup> Media companies have two primary revenue streams through pay-TV—advertising and subscription fees from customers.<sup>129</sup> But rapid technological advancements and newer viewer behaviours have transformed the television broadcasting industry, starting in the late 2000s. The Internet’s effect on the industry cannot be overstated.<sup>130</sup> Michael Strangelove argues that pay-TV’s stubborn insistence on maintaining its outdated business model in today’s digital world has placed it at a severe competitive disadvantage.<sup>131</sup> Before further examining the decline of pay-TV, it is important to first consider how OTT streaming services rose to prominence.

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<sup>128</sup> Insider Intelligence, *Canada Digital Video 2020: Viewership Reaches New Heights This Year*, by Paul Briggs (2020), 3.

<sup>129</sup> Martin Peitz and Tommaso M. Valletti, “Content and advertising in the media: Pay-tv versus free-to-air,” *International Journal of Industrial Organization* 26, no. 4 (July 2008): 949.

<sup>130</sup> Strangelove, *Post-TV*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Strangelove, *Post-TV*, 190.

## Netflix dooming Blockbuster Video

In the early 1990s, Blockbuster Video was a multi billion-dollar company and the world's biggest video-rental chain. However, an important part of its business model was its dependence on penalizing customers by charging late fees. Recognizing this flaw in Blockbuster's revenue model, Netflix launched its DVD rental and sales service in 1998, which mailed videos to consumers and had no due dates or late fee penalties.<sup>132</sup> This also meant that customers no longer needed to actually go to a physical store.<sup>133</sup> Netflix then transitioned into a subscription model—a ground-breaking shift at the time—which allowed consumers to rent DVD's online for a flat monthly fee.<sup>134</sup> Without the high costs of retail locations, on top of the added convenience and flexibility on offer, Netflix began to pose a serious threat to Blockbuster's existence. When Blockbuster started its own by-mail subscription service in 2004, it was already too late.<sup>135</sup> As Blockbuster's demise deepened as a result of its failure to adapt quickly, Netflix further transformed the video rental industry by launching its revolutionary OTT streaming service in 2007.<sup>136</sup> This not only sealed Blockbuster's fate (which filed for bankruptcy in 2010), but it also launched the process by which Netflix and other OTT streaming services targeted the television broadcasting industry, and more specifically, pay-TV.

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<sup>132</sup> Greg Satell, "A Look Back At Why Blockbuster Really Failed And Why It Didn't Have To," *Forbes*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Satell, "A Look Back."

<sup>134</sup> Todd Davis and John Higgins, "A Blockbuster Failure: How an Outdated Business Model Destroyed a Giant," *Chapter 11 Bankruptcy Case Studies*, (2013): 3.

<sup>135</sup> Davis and Higgins, "A Blockbuster Failure," 4.

<sup>136</sup> Cynthia Littleton and Janko Roettgers, "Ted Sarandos on How Netflix Predicted the Future of TV," *Variety*, August 21, 2018.

## Digital Streaming and the Steady Decline of Pay-TV

For many decades, pay-TV relied on having duopolistic control of the market, supported by advertising revenues and subscription fees, to dominate the sports television broadcasting industry.<sup>137</sup> Two of the largest Canadian media conglomerates, Rogers Communications Inc. and BCE Inc. (hereon referred to as Rogers and Bell), used their vast resources and financial power to purchase the often-expensive broadcasting rights of sought-after television programs, including sporting competitions and movie packages. This, in turn, allowed these big conglomerates to steadily raise the costs for consumers by increasing subscription fees.<sup>138</sup> With very few alternatives on the market, the media giants knew that consumers were left with little choice but to pay for their services. However, the emergence of OTT services in the late 2000s and early 2010s drastically changed the landscape of the television broadcasting industry (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Select OTT services in Canada (pricing as of February 2022)

<b>OTT Service</b>	<b>Year Launched in Canada</b>	<b>Basic Monthly Price (in CAD, excld. taxes)</b>	<b>Owner</b>
Netflix	2010	\$9.99	Netflix
Crave	2014	\$9.99	Bell Media
Prime Video	2016	\$7.99	Amazon
Youtube Premium	2018	\$11.99	Google
Paramount Plus (formerly CBS All Access)	2018	\$5.99	Viacom CBS

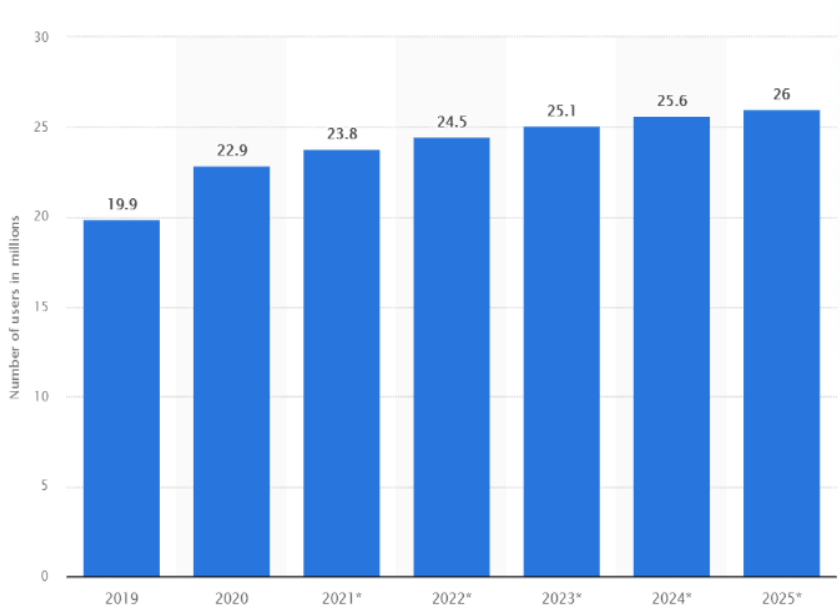
<sup>137</sup> Michael Schneider and Kate Aurthur, “R.I.P. Cable TV: Why Hollywood Is Slowly Killing Its Biggest Moneymaker,” *Variety*, July 21, 2020.

<sup>138</sup> Schneider and Aurthur, “R.I.P. Cable TV.”

Hayu	2018	\$5.99	NBCUniversal
CBC Gem	2018	Free	CBC
Disney Plus	2019	\$11.99	Disney
Apple TV Plus	2019	\$5.99	Apple

According to Convergence Research Group, 33 per cent of Canadian households in 2019 no longer subscribed to traditional multichannel television providers like Rogers and Bell.<sup>139</sup> In 2020, more Canadian households had subscriptions to OTT streaming services than to pay-TV, with Statista placing the number of OTT streaming service users in Canada at about 23 million as of 2020. This marked a fairly significant increase from the 19.9 million recorded in 2019. The figure is expected to grow, as Statista forecasts that by 2025 there will be more than 26 million OTT streaming service users in Canada (Figure 2).<sup>140</sup>

Figure 2: Number of OTT streaming service users in Canada, 2019-2025

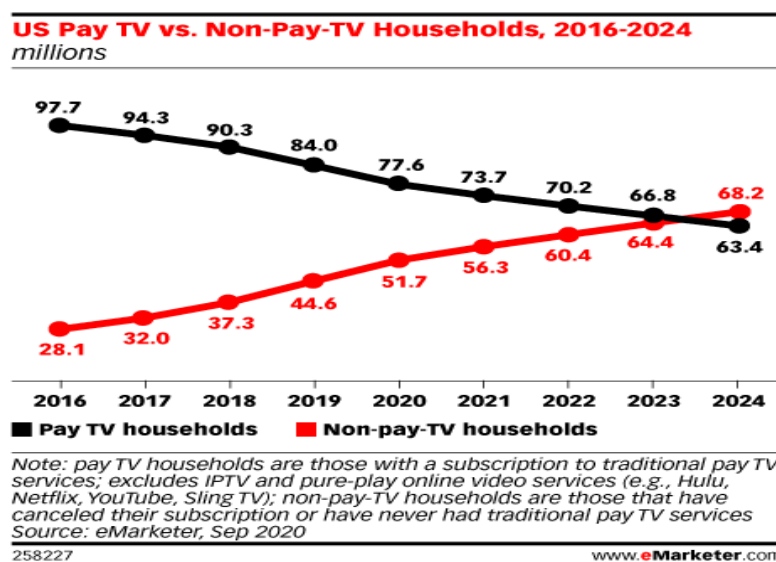


<sup>139</sup> Convergence Research Group, *The Battle for the Canadian Couch Potato: OTT and TV, April 2019* (April 2019).

<sup>140</sup> Statista, *Number of Subscription Over-the-Top (OTT) Video Viewers in Canada from 2019 to 2025*, by Julia Stoll (October 7, 2021).

This trend toward OTT streaming services is also apparent in the United States. At its peak in 2010, 105 million households in the US had pay-TV subscriptions; however, in 2013, American pay-TV lost subscribers for the first time in history.<sup>141</sup> In 2019, American pay-TV experienced its worst consumer loss ever, losing six million subscribers, double the previous year’s number of cancellations.<sup>142</sup> The current number of US households with pay-TV subscriptions has fallen below 80 million and is projected to further decline to 66.8 million by 2023.<sup>143</sup> By 2024, it is estimated that US households without a pay-TV subscription will outnumber pay-TV households (Figure 3).<sup>144</sup>

Figure 3: US Pay-TV vs. Non-Pay-TV Households, 2016-2024



<sup>141</sup> Schneider and Aurthur, “R.I.P. Cable TV.”

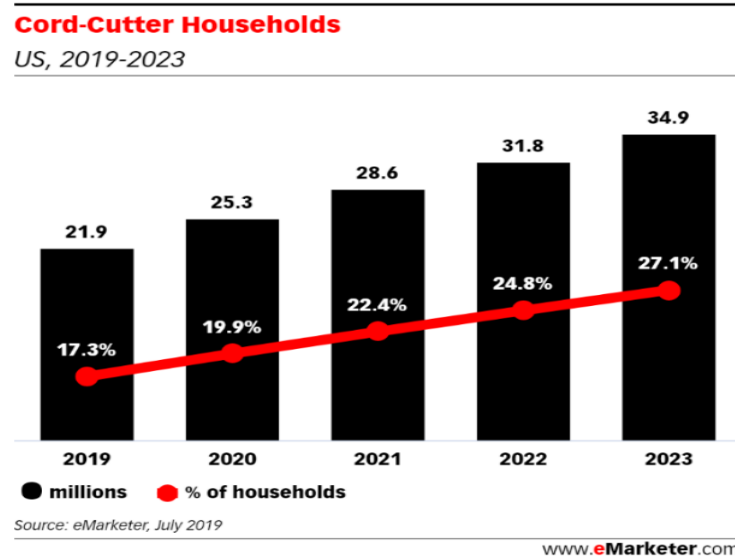
<sup>142</sup> Brandon Katz, “The Death of Pay TV Is Coming Sooner Than You Think,” *Observer*, February 25, 2020.

<sup>143</sup> Alicia Phaneuf, “Most US Households Won’t Have a Pay TV Subscription by 2024,” *Insider Intelligence*, October 8, 2020.

<sup>144</sup> Phaneuf, “Most US Households.”

The numbers indicate that American pay-TV is losing an average of 3 per cent of its subscribers each year, with one in three American households no longer subscribing to pay-TV (Figure 4).<sup>145</sup> In fact, at least three American media conglomerates expect the number of US households that subscribe to a pay-TV bundle to drop to about 50 million by 2025, further challenging the viability and sustainability of the pay-TV business model.<sup>146</sup> Millions have switched over to OTT streaming services, abandoning pay-TV and cutting the cord in the process. But how has this shift occurred, and why is it happening?

Figure 4: Cord-Cutter Households in the US, 2019-2023



A number of factors account for the decline of pay-TV. These include: increasing installation and rental equipment fees; the skyrocketing cost of programming; and cheaper, often more convenient OTT streaming service alternatives. Consider the following example. In 2012, Sportsnet—Rogers’ flagship sports channel—made approximately \$17.30 per customer (on an

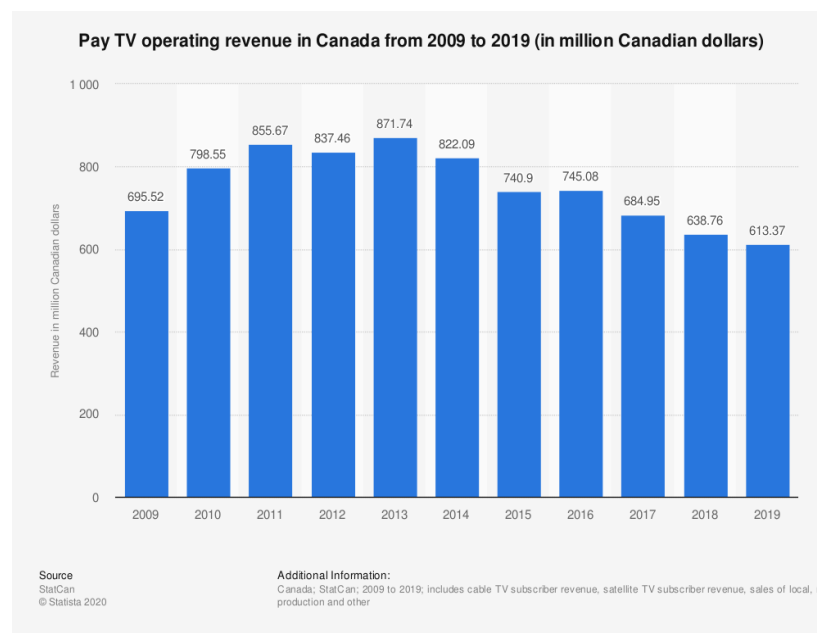
<sup>145</sup> Roku, *Cord Cutting in Uncertain Times* (2020), 3.

<sup>146</sup> Alex Sherman, “Media executives are finally accepting the decline of cable TV as they plot a new path forward,” *CNBC*, October 24, 2020.



annual subscription), but by 2018, this number had risen to \$45.23.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Bell’s marquee sports network, TSN, earned \$26.27 per subscriber in 2012, compared to \$43.10 in 2018.<sup>148</sup> This demonstrates the steep increase in subscription fees charged by Sportsnet and TSN. The pay-TV model has led to a “continuing cycle of increased subscription prices followed by a decline in subscriptions, which in turn necessitates further price increases.”<sup>149</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, pay-TV’s operating revenue in Canada has been consistently falling since 2013 (Figure 5).<sup>150</sup>

Figure 5: Pay-TV operating revenue in Canada from 2009 to 2019 (in million Canadian dollars)



<sup>147</sup> Simon Houpt, “Sports broadcasters have a dirty little secret about airing live games,” *Globe and Mail*, April 19, 2020.

<sup>148</sup> Houpt, “Sports broadcasters.”

<sup>149</sup> Robert Zemsky, Gregory R Wegner, and William F. Massy, *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>150</sup> Statista, *Pay TV operating revenue in Canada from 2009 to 2019* (December 8, 2020).

The trend of rapidly rising pay-TV subscription costs is also apparent in the United States. Between 1995 and 2005, the cost of pay-TV subscriptions increased by three times the rate of inflation.<sup>151</sup> Other problems emerged for pay-TV in the early 2010s. The number of pay-TV households began flatlining as most already had subscriptions.<sup>152</sup> Rising costs also meant that many consumers were unwilling to continue paying for expensive TV bundles that included an abundance of unwatched channels. In fact, the mean monthly bill for an American pay-TV subscriber reached a record high of USD \$109.60 in 2019.<sup>153</sup> As former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin highlighted, “the average cable subscriber was paying for more than 85 channels that she didn’t watch in order to obtain the approximately 16 channels that she does.”<sup>154</sup> This is a notion supported by Chris Long, former programming chief at DirecTV and AT&T, who noted in 2020: “I think it’s 10 years, and there’ll be a total change of the guard. At some point, people will make that decision of ‘I can get everything I want [in streaming]. I no longer need to have 180 channels that I only watch 12 of.’”<sup>155</sup>

Many traditional multichannel television providers belatedly introduced Internet Protocol Television (IPTV), defined as a wireless service that uses a private, dedicated Internet network to

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<sup>151</sup> Ben Popper, “The great unbundling: cable TV as we know it is dying,” *Verge*, April 22, 2015.

<sup>152</sup> Schneider and Aurthur, “R.I.P. Cable TV.”

<sup>153</sup> Leichtman Research Group, “Pay-TV in the U.S. 2019,” 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Popper, “The great unbundling.”

<sup>155</sup> Schneider and Aurthur, “R.I.P. Cable TV.”

deliver live and on-demand TV programs to consumers.<sup>156</sup> In Canada, Bell was at the forefront of this development, having launched its IPTV service, called Fibe TV, in 2010. Rogers responded in 2018 with its own IPTV service, Ignite TV. Some of the features offered by these IPTV services include smaller, sleeker set-top boxes, voice-activated remotes and the ability to record, pause or even restart programs on different devices.<sup>157</sup> For the media conglomerates, one of the main advantages of transitioning to IPTV services is that it requires consumers to continue paying for program bundles that include high-speed Internet. In other words, Fibe TV is only available to customers who also subscribe to Bell's home internet service, and the same applies to Rogers and Ignite TV. Most traditional multichannel television providers will likely transition to all-IP networks in the future, although it may take some time to convince longstanding customers to give up their older, non-IP technologies and switch to IPTV.<sup>158</sup> In October 2019, Rogers announced that it would begin phasing out its non-IP technologies.<sup>159</sup>

While OTT streaming services provide viewers with a more customized and targeted experience, traditional multichannel television providers continue to perpetuate a rather antiquated and costly model—even with IPTV services, like Ignite TV and Fibe TV. Despite adding television package options that allow customers to handpick a selection of their favourite channels, these IPTV services still do not properly address the overpriced channel-buffet issue. Simply put, viewers' ability to choose OTT streaming services that best suit their preferences has

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<sup>156</sup> Strangelove, *Post-TV*, 9.

<sup>157</sup> Christine Dobby, "Rogers launches long-delayed internet-TV service, Ignite TV, as telecom battle heats up," *Globe and Mail*, August 19, 2018.

<sup>158</sup> Christine Dobby, "Everything you need to know about IPTV," *Globe and Mail*, January 17, 2017.

<sup>159</sup> "Discontinuation of our Digital TV Packages: FAQs," Rogers, October 28, 2019.

upended the need for pay-TV's big bundles. This has allowed consumers to save significant sums of money. General entertainment OTT streaming services vary in pricing, but as Figure 1 indicated, most cost between \$6 to \$12 a month—much less than pay-TV's bundled television packages. Moreover, unlike pay-TV, most OTT streaming services do not rely on an advertising-supported revenue model, which means that they do not interrupt programming with ads or commercials. Instead, they employ a subscription video-on-demand model, where the revenues come primarily from users' fees. In addition, most OTT streaming services do not penalize consumers with cancellation fees, as there are no contracts.

### **Challenges with Digital Streaming**

Despite certain advantages that OTT streaming services provide, there are drawbacks to consider. First, there are upfront costs, such as the need for a reliable Internet connection and a plan with a considerable or unlimited amount of data. Users who have Internet plans with a set data allowance per month can face overage charges if they exceed their data allowance, which can be quite costly. In addition, most OTT streaming services cannot be viewed on older, non-smart TVs, meaning that consumers would need to have a smart TV or access to a portable media player, gaming console, tablet, smartphone, or laptop. There are ways to add “smart” features to non-smart TVs; however, in most instances, third-party devices are required, which is another additional cost. Portable media players, for instance, are able to turn existing, older TVs into smart TVs, but they range in price, with the cheaper options normally costing in the \$40 to \$50 range, while the more expensive ones are valued at upwards of \$200. Alternatively, a more affordable option is to stream on a laptop and mirror the screen and sound onto a television through the use of an HDMI cord. Yet, despite this being a low-cost approach, it is far from the easiest or most clutter-free way to do things. I have personally tried this method in the past, and

while it generally works, there have been instances when the video or the audio did not simultaneously project through the TV, which can be extremely frustrating.

Another limitation that comes with streaming is the generational and technological challenge that it poses, which can be a fairly significant hurdle to overcome.<sup>160</sup> According to a 2016-17 Deloitte survey of Australian consumers, 78 per cent of seniors aged 65-75 owned a smartphone, as well as 82 per cent of those aged 55-64.<sup>161</sup> Yet, a survey conducted by researchers at RMIT University determined that while this segment of the population had high levels of digital device ownership, it only had “moderate” levels of confidence in using them.<sup>162</sup> The findings are similar elsewhere. In the US, more than half of the population aged 65 and older are smartphone owners, but research shows that some seniors face unique challenges with respect to technology usage.<sup>163</sup> These include physical barriers, as well as a lack of comfort and familiarity when using electronic devices. In a 2015 survey, only 26 per cent of seniors described themselves as “very” confident when using technology, with approximately one-third saying that they were “only a little” (23 per cent) or “not at all” (11 per cent) confident in their ability. In stark contrast, almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of those aged 18-29 described themselves as

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<sup>160</sup> Kate Conger and Erin Griffith, “As Life Moves Online, an Older Generation Faces a Digital Divide,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2020.

<sup>161</sup> Deloitte, *Smart Everything, Everywhere: Mobile Consumer Survey 2017 - The Australian Cut*, by Jeremy Drumm et al., (2017), 7.

<sup>162</sup> Bernardo Figueiredo and Torgeir Aleti, “Seniors struggle with technology, and often their kids won’t help,” *Conversation*, January 28, 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Pew Research Center, *Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults*, by Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin (2017), 10.

“very” confident when using technology, highlighting the vast technological generation gap that can—at times—exist.<sup>164</sup>

In other words, seniors—as a segment of the population—are far more likely to be “digitally unprepared” in comparison to younger age groups.<sup>165</sup> At home, my family and I use an Amazon Fire TV stick to add “smart” features to our TV in order to access OTT services, like Netflix. On more than one occasion when I was away at university, there was a software bug affecting the streaming stick, and my parents were unable to fix the problem, so they called me for help. Unfortunately, I was unable to identify the issue remotely, so they were deprived of their favourite programs and sports for a couple of weeks until I returned home and updated the software. At other times, the streaming stick has frozen and needed to be rebooted, so these portable media players are not immune from causing issues for users. Others have experienced similar problems:

Out in Victoria, Paul Hanson says his 69-year-old father, a lifelong Arsenal supporter, all but stopped watching English soccer after the UEFA Champions League games moved to DAZN [an OTT sports streaming service] in 2018. “He was struggling to figure out: ‘How do I get this on my computer? Or onto my TV? And why can’t I just PVR the game and when I get home from the office just play it like I’ve been able to for the previous 10 years?’” Hanson explained.<sup>166</sup>

Many, like my father or Hanson’s father, have always been accustomed to turning on their TVs

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<sup>164</sup> Anderson and Perrin, *Tech Adoption Climbs*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Pew Research Center, *Digital Readiness Gaps*, by John B. Horrigan (September 20, 2016), 3.

<sup>166</sup> Simon Houpt, “We like to watch sports. So why is it so difficult?” *Globe and Mail*, December 13, 2019.

to watch their favourite sports teams play; however, some are now finding it rather difficult to master this new, and at times, confusing technology.

The Canadian Premier League (CPL) has set its sights on under-35 fans, the so-called “digital natives.” With Millennials, Generation Z’s, and Generation Alpha’s representing the league’s target market, many other Canadians may feel excluded from familiarizing themselves with the CPL. But the league’s Vice-President of Marketing Roy Nasrallah is unapologetic about the reasoning behind this strategy: “We want to go for younger people because we have a young product. Our players [in the league] are young. From a commercial side, name me a brand around the world [that] wants to target a 45-year-old... We have to win with the youth to secure the future. Why [do] brands like Nike, Coca Cola, Apple, and McDonald’s speak to the youth? Because they’re looking for long-term affinity and loyalty... And you know, when you take this data and you tell any sponsor, they will run towards you and say ‘I can’t believe you have these numbers.’”<sup>167</sup>

Another factor to consider involves the digital divide concerning urban and rural broadband Internet services. While relatively affordable Internet connections exist in most densely populated areas, access to broadband Internet remains out of reach for many in rural and small-town areas. Reporter Kevin Laramée highlights this divide: “Broadband internet is not as widespread as city dwellers would believe. I know people who live not that far away from a big city, and they’re still downloading a picture an hour.”<sup>168</sup> It is important to understand what constitutes “high-speed Internet.” According to the Canadian Radio-television and

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<sup>167</sup> Roy Nasrallah, interview by author, via Zoom, February 11, 2021.

<sup>168</sup> Kevin Laramée, interview by author, via Zoom, January 5, 2021.

Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), “speeds of 50 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload reflect what is needed for Canadians to be fully engaged online.”<sup>169</sup> In 2017, the CRTC estimated that only 37 per cent of Canadians living in rural areas had access to high-speed Internet, compared with 97 per cent of urban homes.<sup>170</sup> This figure was even lower (24 per cent) for households in Indigenous communities.<sup>171</sup> Upload speeds for Canadians residing in rural and remote areas were—on average—ten times slower than for those living in urban centres, while download speeds were also considerably slower.<sup>172</sup> This presents a significant challenge for OTT applications, as fast upload speeds are necessary for streaming services to properly work. The same rule applies for cloud storage, video calls, online gaming, and many other productivity apps. While the federal government says that it will ensure that 98 per cent of the Canadian population has access to high-speed internet by 2026, the current available speeds in large swathes of rural Canada simply do not support uninterrupted streaming.<sup>173</sup>

Low population densities in rural areas make it quite costly to provide high-speed Internet connectivity for people living there. While urban areas may have hundreds of customers per kilometre, the opposite applies to rural and remote areas, where there may just be one or two

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<sup>169</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, *High-Speed Access for All: Canada's Connectivity Strategy* (2019), 12.

<sup>170</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, *High-Speed Access*, 5.

<sup>171</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, *High-Speed Access*, 5.

<sup>172</sup> Josh Tabish, “New internet performance data shows the staggering scale of Canada’s urban-rural digital divide,” Canadian Internet Registration Authority, May 8, 2020.

<sup>173</sup> Sylvain Charlebois, “Eliminating the rural-urban divide, one internet connection at a time,” *Hamilton Spectator*, November 30, 2020.



customers per kilometre.<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, the urban-rural digital divide needs to be addressed to ensure equal access for those living in sparsely populated areas. The case of Paul Stubbens highlights a problem all-too familiar to rural residents in Canada:

Stubbens, who now lives just outside of London, Ont., doesn't have home Internet service robust enough for him to watch DAZN stream on his 70-inch TV. "Going to online-only access is taking a step backward," he suggested during a phone interview. Stubbens can watch the games on his iPhone, using cellphone data instead of his home Internet, but once he tries to send the signal to the TV, everything just begins to buffer and seize. Besides, he can't watch many games that way before hitting his 100-gigabyte-a-month cellphone-data limit. Living where he does, he explained, it's "physically not possible," to watch the games on a TV that receives its signal from the Internet.<sup>175</sup>

Even in urban areas that generally have more reliable Internet service, there are occasions when the connection lags or cuts out altogether, which means that streaming is affected. Non-IP technologies, like cable television, did not have to contend with issues of that nature as they were not reliant on the Internet.

Another issue concerns what Deloitte labels as "subscription fatigue." A recent poll found that 47 per cent of US consumers believe that there are too many streaming options in the marketplace.<sup>176</sup> Similarly, a study which surveyed more than 6,000 consumers across the US, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands, showed that 70 per cent of consumers felt overwhelmed

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<sup>174</sup> Charlebois, "Eliminating the rural-urban divide."

<sup>175</sup> Houpt, "We like to watch sports."

<sup>176</sup> Deloitte, *Digital Media Trends Survey 13th Edition: Piecing It Together*, by Kevin Westcott et al., (2019), 7.

by the growing number of subscription services needed to watch their preferred programming, with 87 per cent worrying that this overabundance of choice will soon become too expensive.<sup>177</sup>

## **Live Sports**

Live sports have long been viewed as the primary motivator for many households to maintain pay-TV subscriptions, particularly as sporting events are among the most prominent, must-see, live programming nowadays. In 2018, Nielsen's top-rated live programs showed that, in terms of same-day viewership, 89 of the top 100 US broadcasts were live sports.<sup>178</sup> Moreover, in 2017, 81 per cent of American sports fans subscribed to pay-TV, with 89 per cent saying that watching sporting events live is essential.<sup>179</sup> However, 82 per cent of those surveyed also indicated that they would completely cancel or reduce their TV packages if it were possible for them to watch their preferred sports via OTT streaming services.<sup>180</sup> As a result, Disney has heavily invested in acquiring sports media rights for its dedicated sports streaming service, ESPN+. ViacomCBS also provides a wide range of live sports content through its newly rebranded OTT service Paramount+ (formerly CBS All Access), and WarnerMedia's OTT service, HBO Max, is ultimately anticipated to feature live sports as well.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Whip Media Group Company, *Beyond The Big Three: The Streaming Wars Are Upon Us*, by Alex von Krogh and David Herrin (2019), 4.

<sup>178</sup> Deloitte, *The Future of Sports Broadcasting: Enhancing Digital Fan Engagement*, by Adam Deutsch et al., (2018), 5.

<sup>179</sup> PwC, *Consumer Intelligence Series: I Stream, You Stream - Winning in a Video World*, by Mark McCaffrey, Paige Hayes, and Jason Wagner (2017), 5.

<sup>180</sup> McCaffrey, Hayes, and Wagner, *Consumer Intelligence Series*, 2.

<sup>181</sup> Cynthia Littleton, "AT&T Chief: HBO Max Will 'Ultimately' Offer Live News, Sports," *Variety*, July 24, 2019.

The landscape in Canada is not dissimilar. In 2019, only 3 per cent of Canadians subscribed to a dedicated sports OTT streaming service.<sup>182</sup> While this figure has certainly increased since then, the reality remains that most Canadian sports fans continue to watch the bulk of their preferred live sporting events through traditional pay-TV services. Yet, sports fans—across all groups—are placing an increasing emphasis on “convenience,” as a Deloitte survey found that this factor was nearly 2.5 times more important than most other attributes, while millennials rated it as *the* most important factor.<sup>183</sup> (The three most important factors among all fan groups were picture quality, convenience, and the ability to use an on-demand function.)<sup>184</sup> This helps explain why traditional multichannel television providers like Rogers and Bell are now offering their own dedicated sports OTT streaming services via their sports specialty channels. Both Sportsnet and TSN now provide a dedicated sports OTT streaming service that gives viewers full access to their associated network’s linear content. Rogers launched Sportsnet Now in 2016, and Bell followed suit in 2018 with TSN Direct and the French-language RDS Direct, allowing consumers without a pay-TV subscription to sign up. Evidently, the emergence of dedicated sports OTT streaming services has managed to disrupt the traditional sports broadcasting industry by providing consumers with a relatively cheaper, on-demand, and more personalized viewing experience, which has alleviated the financial burden for many sports fans.<sup>185</sup> With sports fans now able to subscribe to many OTT streaming services

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<sup>182</sup> Insider Intelligence, *Sports OTT Landscape in Canada: How Digital and Mobile Streaming Is Disrupting TV in 2019*, by Paul Briggs and Paul Verna (2019), 3.

<sup>183</sup> Deutsch et al., *The future of sports broadcasting*, 6.

<sup>184</sup> Deutsch et al., *The future of sports broadcasting*, 8.

<sup>185</sup> Strangelove, *Post-TV*, 100.

that best suit their needs, they can avoid paying for pay-TV's old, overpriced and needless channel-buffet bundles.

### **Increasing Competition in the Sports Broadcasting Industry**

Traditional multichannel television providers are expected to face increasingly tough competition from OTT streaming service challengers to acquire media rights for sports leagues.<sup>186</sup> In 2016, Twitter entered the sports broadcasting market by negotiating a cut-price fee of USD \$10 million with the National Football League (NFL) to globally stream ten Thursday night games, a non-exclusive agreement as the games were also broadcast on network television.<sup>187</sup> In 2017, Amazon made its first foray into the industry and acquired the rights from Twitter (to the same global streaming package), successfully outbidding Facebook and Youtube. However, it paid USD \$50 million—five times more than what Twitter had paid.<sup>188</sup> Since then, Amazon has renewed the deal multiple times, most recently signing a USD \$1 billion per season agreement—for eleven years—with the NFL for the exclusive rights to 15 “Thursday Night Football” games, starting in 2022.<sup>189</sup> (Although the games will still be available on broadcast television in local markets, this deal marks the first time that NFL games will be exclusively provided by an OTT streaming service.)<sup>190</sup> Facebook, for its part, streamed 20 non-exclusive

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<sup>186</sup> Deutsch et al., *The future of sports broadcasting*, 5.

<sup>187</sup> Scott Soshnick, Sarah Frier, and Scott Moritz, “Twitter Gets NFL Thursday Night Games for a Bargain Price,” *Bloomberg*, April 5, 2016.

<sup>188</sup> Spencer Soper, Scott Soshnick, and Sarah Frier, “Amazon to Pay \$50 Million to Stream NFL Thursday Games: Source,” *Bloomberg*, April 5, 2017.

<sup>189</sup> Alex Sherman, “Amazon’s exclusive ‘Thursday Night Football’ package will begin in 2022 instead of 2023,” *CNBC*, May 3, 2021.

<sup>190</sup> Sherman, “Amazon’s exclusive.”

Major League Baseball (MLB) games during the 2017 regular season and followed that up by paying more than USD \$30 million to exclusively stream 25 MLB games worldwide in 2018—free of charge and supported by ads.<sup>191</sup> Facebook also landed the full exclusive rights in the Indian subcontinent to stream Spain’s top-flight soccer league, La Liga, as well as 32 UEFA Champions League matches in Latin America from 2018 to 2021. However, Facebook declined to renew both deals, and it only streamed six, non-exclusive MLB games in 2019.<sup>192</sup>

In fact, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have cooled their interest in livestreaming sports, with Facebook’s Director of Sports Media and League Partnerships Rob Shaw admitting that “traditional media rights deals like these aren’t compatible with our current video business model.”<sup>193</sup> Nevertheless, many OTT streaming services remain determined to fend off competition from pay-TV operators and traditional broadcasters in order to purchase sports rights. The Canadian Premier League’s Director of Licensing Jim Neish adds that “if you research over-the-air television ratings across [almost] every league right now, they’re on the decline,” which helps explain the shifting landscape.<sup>194</sup> In order to increase their revenues, some sports leagues—like the NFL—are even selling secondary digital streaming rights to complement their traditional televised broadcasts.

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<sup>191</sup> Todd Spangler, “Facebook Nabs MLB Exclusive Global Rights to 25 Games,” *Variety*, March 9, 2018.

<sup>192</sup> Luke Cyphers, “Facebook Declines to Renew UEFA, La Liga Broadcasts in Latin America and India,” *Yahoo Sports*, March 3, 2021.

<sup>193</sup> Cyphers, “Facebook Declines.”

<sup>194</sup> Jim Neish, interview by author, via Zoom, December 10, 2020.

## DAZN

The global dedicated sports OTT streaming service DAZN (pronounced Da-Zone) is one of the biggest players in the market. DAZN first launched in Austria, Germany and Switzerland in 2016, before doing so in Canada in 2017. It is owned by the billionaire Sir Leonard Blavatnik and is operated by the UK-based and privately-run DAZN Group Limited. DAZN's rapid worldwide expansion has been bold from a financial perspective.<sup>195</sup> Broadly speaking, its business model is similar to Netflix's approach of building viewership through the acquisition of substantial content while sustaining significant initial losses until it reaches a volume of subscribers that delivers profitability.<sup>196</sup> As of April 2019, DAZN's global media rights commitments totalled a staggering USD \$6.1 billion.<sup>197</sup>

In Canada, DAZN has become a competitor of Sportsnet and TSN, which previously enjoyed a duopolistic stranglehold of the sports broadcasting industry. DAZN currently has the exclusive streaming rights to every National Football League game in Canada, as well as exclusive Canadian rights to the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, and the English Premier League.<sup>198</sup> It also has the out-of-market livestreaming rights for Major League

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<sup>195</sup> Brett Hutchins, Bo Li, and David Rowe, "Over-the-top sport: live streaming services, changing coverage rights markets and the growth of media sport portals," *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 7 (2019): 987.

<sup>196</sup> Hutchins, Li, and Rowe, "Over-the-top-sport," 987.

<sup>197</sup> Sam Carp, "Digital sports media company saw turnover reach US\$878m for year prior to Covid-19," *SportsPro*, January 4, 2021.

<sup>198</sup> Simon Houpt, "fuboTV buys Canadian rights to English Premier League," *Globe and Mail*, January 13, 2022. As of the 2022-23 season, the exclusive Canadian broadcasting rights to the English Premier League will belong to FuboTV after it secured a three-year deal (through the 2024/2025 season), snatching the rights away from DAZN. FuboTV is a sports-oriented OTT streaming service that includes both OneSoccer and BeIn Sports Connect as part of its channel lineup.

Soccer (MLS) games featuring American teams, as well as the on-demand rights to stream the three Canadian teams' matches 48 hours after their original broadcast. In addition, DAZN has the Canadian media rights to some mixed martial arts, cricket, snooker and tennis competitions. DAZN costs \$150 per year (\$20 on a monthly subscription), but it allows sports fans to watch some of the most popular leagues and teams for a relatively affordable cost.

### **OneSoccer**

OneSoccer, which livestreams CPL matches, finds itself in direct competition with DAZN. Given that DAZN is one of the leaders in professional sports streaming and holds a wide range of soccer-league media rights, OneSoccer faces a significant challenge in its quest to rival DAZN. Consequently, OneSoccer's pricing options reflect its more-limited content offerings. It offers a monthly subscription fee of \$9.99 or a yearly pass costing \$99.99.

*Figure 6: Select streaming services in Canada with broadcasting rights to marquee soccer competitions (as of February 2022)*

<b>Streaming Service</b>	<b>Year Launched in Canada</b>	<b>Monthly Price (in CAD, exclud. taxes)</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Marquee Soccer Content (by competition)</b>
beIn Sports Connect  (also available via fuboTV)	2014	\$14.95/month (yearly option available for \$99.95)	beIN Media Group	French Ligue 1, Turkish Süper Lig, South American Copa Libertadores
Sportsnet Now	2016	Standard: \$14.99/month (yearly option available for \$149.99)	Rogers	German Bundesliga, English FA Cup, English FA Women's Super League,

		Premium: \$34.99/month (yearly option available for \$249.99)		Select 2022 Canadian Men's World Cup Qualifiers
fuboTV	2016	\$12.50/month (prepaid yearly at \$150 and three-month option available for \$40)	FBNK	Italian Serie A, Coppa Italia, and BeIn Sports Connect and OneSoccer's content
DAZN	2017	\$20/month (yearly option available for \$150)	DAZN Group Limited	UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, English Premier League, Major League Soccer (3 Canadian teams' games not available live)
TSN Direct	2018	\$19.99 (yearly option available for \$199.90)	Bell	Spanish La Liga, Major League Soccer, FIFA World Cup, FIFA Women's World Cup
OneSoccer  (available via fuboTV)	2019	\$9.99 (yearly option available for \$99.99)	Mediapro	Canadian Premier League, CONCACAF Champions League, CONCACAF Gold Cup, All Canadian Men's and Women's National Team games

Mediapro is seeking to differentiate OneSoccer from the competition through extensive Canadian content. As Figure 6 highlights, OneSoccer not only owns the broadcasting rights to



the CPL but also all national team games, including the 2022 World Cup qualifiers which became a very hot commodity. Not too long ago, the Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) had to buy airtime on traditional television for a network to produce and broadcast games as the national team consistently struggled through repeated qualification cycles.<sup>199</sup> Unlike the mainstream Canadian sports networks, Mediapro sensed an opportunity and capitalized on it. “We are investing in Canada, we have new employees, we are producing here. More than 85 per cent of our content is Canadian. We are trying for gender equity,” says Oscar Lopez, the CEO of Mediapro Canada.<sup>200</sup>

But, soccer podcaster David Amoyal says that even though OneSoccer is currently just a little-known OTT streaming service, it can still prove to be a good home for a league in its fledgling stages. He adds that the CPL’s current priority should be to develop its fanbase organically at the grassroots level in order to generate more widespread interest in the product.<sup>201</sup> “Let’s assume the CPL is on DAZN right now. Are more people going to watch it because it’s there, or will they rather watch the Premier League or Champions League games?”<sup>202</sup> There are potential competitive advantages for niche streaming services, such as increased authenticity and

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<sup>199</sup> Simon Houpt, “Canada’s men’s soccer went from couldn’t-give-it-away to show-me-the-money,” *Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2021.

<sup>200</sup> Houpt, “Canada’s men’s soccer.”

<sup>201</sup> David Amoyal, interview by author, via Zoom, January 2, 2021.

<sup>202</sup> Amoyal, interview.

a more loyal following among their consumers, but people must be aware of their existence in order for them to succeed, and they must also bring value to their subscribers.<sup>203</sup>

### **CPL Viewership**

One of the major concerns with the CPL’s broadcasting arrangement with Mediapro involves how it can increase viewership if most matches are stuck behind a paywall. Will this current setup only cater to diehard Canadian soccer supporters and ignore casual fans?

OneSoccer’s ratings and subscriptions remain a mystery, as Mediapro—like most other OTT services—does not publicly release these figures. However, CNBC reported in 2020 that DAZN had approximately eight million subscribers globally, including one million in the US.<sup>204</sup> It is difficult to estimate how many customers subscribe to DAZN in Canada, particularly as DAZN purchases its sports rights territorially rather than globally, but Convergence Research Group puts the number in the low six figures.<sup>205</sup> With OneSoccer being a newer service with limited sports content in comparison to DAZN, it is unlikely that its subscriber count is at DAZN’s level.

There are other ways, however, to gauge the CPL’s popularity. According to Laramee, one million viewers is considered the benchmark for success in Canadian television ratings, with one to two million representing an amazing rating.<sup>206</sup> The TV ratings for the ten matches that the CBC broadcast in 2019 on its linear platforms had a network reach of 3,216,000 in total, with an

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<sup>203</sup> Tim Peterson, “How niche streaming services thrive in the land of giants,” *Digiday*, October 24, 2019.

<sup>204</sup> Julia Boorstin, “Streaming sports service DAZN chasing NFL Sunday Ticket rights,” *CNBC*, March 2, 2020.

<sup>205</sup> Briggs and Verna, *Sports OTT Landscape in Canada*, 5.

<sup>206</sup> Laramee, interview.

average reach per game of 422,000, and an average minute audience of 54,000.<sup>207</sup> How does this compare to other sports leagues' viewing figures in Canada? In 2017, from April through July, the MLB's Toronto Blue Jays averaged 706,300 viewers per game on Sportsnet, while regional broadcasts of the Toronto Maple Leafs averaged 536,000 viewers on Sportsnet during the NHL season that year.<sup>208</sup> Hockey Night in Canada, meanwhile, drew an average audience of 1.8 million viewers for the 7 p.m. EST game, and 821,000 viewers for the 10 p.m. EST game in 2017.<sup>209</sup> Evidently, these numbers are significantly higher than the CPL's viewership; however, it must be noted that the CPL is a newly established league. It needs time to gradually build a strong supporter base and steadily increase its popularity.

Still, with most CPL games not widely televised, there is a risk that a new league will struggle to grow its supporter base because it is primarily available behind a paywalled OTT streaming service. At the same time though, Mediapro has provided long-term financial sustainability for the league with its multimillion-dollar, ten-year contract. Will this reduce the CPL's mainstream relevance, as casual fans who might otherwise have caught matches on TV simply opt to watch something else? It is fair to wonder if Canadian sports fans should be able to access the country's top-tier, national domestic soccer league on TV rather than through a lesser-known OTT streaming service. Neish, however, disagrees with this assessment: "You could have

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<sup>207</sup> Williams, "Canadian Premier League off to solid start."

<sup>208</sup> Neil Davidson, "Toronto FC success drives up ratings while struggling Jays' numbers drop," *Canadian Press*, August 8, 2017.

<sup>209</sup> Davidson, "Toronto FC success drives up ratings."

a terrestrial [broadcast] deal with a TSN or Sportsnet, but it is not necessarily going to guarantee that people are going to watch your product, so there is a growth and development piece.”<sup>210</sup>

There are also reasons to be optimistic about the CPL’s growth potential, even without its presence on the top sports networks or other traditional channels. Some professional sports have already shifted their strategies to focus on catering to diehard fanbases rather than to seeking new supporters. This means that instead of broadcasting content on multisport channels and bidding for airtime on these networks, there is value in having a single, dedicated media home.<sup>211</sup> One reason for this is that traditional sports networks simply do not have the time to tell the story of an entire league, its teams, or its players. In the US, tennis is moving in this new direction. The Tennis Channel, which is available as both a pay-TV and OTT streaming service, has gradually become the specialized hub for competitive tennis. It has so far fended off competition from sports network giants like ESPN to retain the rights to most major tennis events beyond the Grand Slams.<sup>212</sup> Similarly, Neish points out that the CPL is hoping to appeal to its more fervent and passionate fans through OneSoccer. These are people who are desperate to support a domestic product, whether it’s the national team or a national league like the CPL. “It’s more tailored to the hardcore fan, so right now, our subscription base is geotargeted to a lot of our existing fans, and the challenge is to grow that. And as the league starts to grow, that will become a natural progressive piece,” adds Neish.<sup>213</sup> Evidently, this strategy requires an

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<sup>210</sup> Neish, interview.

<sup>211</sup> Matthew Futterman, “After the Grand Slams, Tennis Plots Its Growth Plan,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2020.

<sup>212</sup> Futterman, “After the Grand Slams.”

<sup>213</sup> Neish, interview.

acceptance that it will take time to build a fanbase. The goal is to steadily increase the league's viewership over a number of years, rather than to expect a sudden spike in the short-term.

Another important dimension to consider is the value of getting the kind of exposure that television networks cannot offer. Andrea Gaudenzi, the chairman of the Association of Tennis Professionals, believes that in today's digital age, telling stories about tennis players and their journeys through documentaries, interviews and videos are key to expanding the sport's reach.<sup>214</sup>

For the CPL, an OTT streaming service like OneSoccer can help generate interest in the league with features about teams and players, rather than simply delivering the games. This was a fundamental factor in the CPL's decision to opt for OneSoccer, according to Neish:

One of the pillars of the Mediapro deal is that they're not just a broadcast partner and that's the shift that's happening. You're going to more of these multimedia partnerships in untraditional platforms. We've been fortunate that CBC picked up some games, but that digital platform [OneSoccer] is just ripe with opportunity. It'd be easy to take an over-the-air deal but what is a TSN or CBC going to invest in shoulder programming outside of covering our games? Are they going to broadcast every single one of our games to our marketplaces at the time they're actually taking place? The trend nowadays is to veer away from the traditional broadcast partnership. There were all kinds of suitors for the CPL, but I think what Mediapro brought to the table was a commitment to really buying into growing and developing the image and brand of the CPL. That is not only from a quality standpoint in terms of how they produce the broadcast, but also committing to shoulder programming, talk shows, preview shows and documentaries and all of those things that when you add up the sum of the collective parts, gives us a bigger voice in the marketplace.<sup>215</sup>

Given the importance of TV ratings, it is arguable whether Canada's main sports networks even wanted to televise CPL games. Nevertheless, OneSoccer can prove—over time—to not only be a disruptor in the industry but an ideal partner for a league in its fledgling stages.

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<sup>214</sup> Futterman, "After the Grand Slams."

<sup>215</sup> Neish, interview.

After all, Lopez would like OneSoccer to become “the destination point for soccer in this country.”<sup>216</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The future of sports broadcasting is seemingly headed in only one direction. In fact, one of America’s most viewed sports networks, NBC Sports Network, shut down at the end of 2021, with NBCUniversal moving a significant portion of its sports content to its OTT streaming service, Peacock. Adam Epstein, Quartz Media’s entertainment reporter, sums up this shift by writing: “The direction in which the industry is headed is clear. If fans don’t start embracing streaming now, it will soon be thrust upon them.”<sup>217</sup> While some users face issues with OTT streaming services, such as barriers to learning a new technology, hardware compatibility malfunctions, software bugs, and Internet connectivity problems, the sports broadcasting industry is belatedly pivoting to the OTT streaming landscape. That is why the Canadian Soccer Business’ decision to sign a long-term deal with Mediapro to broadcast all CPL games on OneSoccer can be seen as a forward-looking—albeit risky—move. Unlike sports channels like Sportsnet and TSN, OneSoccer is not a well-known entity, nor does it have a comparable coast-to-coast reach. Moreover, unlike DAZN, OneSoccer lacks premium sports content and programming to compete on that front. However, the CPL’s target audience skews younger, while the league is primarily catering to a demographic that prefers viewing live sports through OTT streaming services rather than traditional television broadcasts. Similar to the Tennis Channel, the CPL is attempting to build longer lasting, closer relationships with its existing

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<sup>216</sup> Hought, “Canada’s men’s soccer.”

<sup>217</sup> Adam Epstein, “Sports fans, accept your streaming future,” *Quartz*, January 25, 2021.

fanbase by promoting Canadian content to generate additional interest in and passion for its product, and to subsequently attract more fans in the future.

### **Chapter 3: Fandom**

Fans and spectators are the lifeblood of sporting organizations. This is not a groundbreaking concept, as most professional leagues that have gone defunct have suffered from varying degrees of low spectatorship. When the Canadian Professional Soccer League was in its fledgling stages in 2000, the *London Free Press*'s Kathy Rumleski wrote: "What the league really needs is a good fan base."<sup>218</sup> In the end, the league failed to develop the required audience appeal to remain afloat and eventually folded. Duane Rockerbie, a contributor to the *Easton Report*, points out: "So often, what these startup leagues want to do is play games and they think people will just show up. When they don't, you fail."<sup>219</sup> Since fans are integral to the success of sporting organizations, they constitute key stakeholders.<sup>220</sup> After all, they not only invest considerable time and emotional energy into their favourite teams, but they also contribute directly to their team's revenues by purchasing matchday tickets, subscribing to watch games, and buying gear and merchandise. This chapter examines the meaning behind being a sports fan, including how fans assume roles in terms of their identification with their team, as well as their participation within the fan community. The chapter then considers the historical significance of locality in soccer and explains how CPL teams have articulated their local identity in a way that appeals to their respective populations. The roles played by local communities and fans in the sporting

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<sup>218</sup> Kathy Rumleski, "Players, teams clamouring to be part of soccer league," *London Free Press*, November 8, 2000.

<sup>219</sup> Trevor Kenney, "Economic health of new Canadian Premier League based on groundwork from U of L's Dr. Duane Rockerbie," University of Lethbridge, June 14, 2019.

<sup>220</sup> Patrizia Zagnoli and Elena Radicchi, "The football-fan community as a determinant stakeholder in value co-creation," *Sport in Society* 13, no. 10 (November 2010): 1532.



culture of the league is also discussed, with a particular focus on the impact of supporters' groups in the formation of the CPL.

### **What is a sports fan?**

Researchers have consistently highlighted differences between terms like “fans,” “spectators,” “enthusiasts,” and “followers.”<sup>221</sup> Therefore, it is first important to distinguish between a sport fan and a sport spectator. A “fan” can be defined as an individual with an abiding interest in a sport, a team or an athlete, whereas a “spectator” is considered to be a person who attends sporting events, like a match-going supporter, or someone who regularly watch these events from afar.<sup>222</sup> These terms are not generally interchangeable, nor are they mutually exclusive. For instance, most spectators who attend a game in-person are typically fans of one of the teams involved. Similarly, fans turn into spectators when they watch a sporting event. In this chapter, the term “fans” will be used in a generic way to refer to individuals who are intensely devoted to their team and who demonstrate an obsessed, unwavering loyalty and passion toward it.<sup>223</sup> This is a characterization that researchers Stephen Reysen and Nyla Branscombe support, noting that “any individual who is enthusiastic, ardent, and [a] loyal admirer of something can be reasonably considered [to be] a fan.”<sup>224</sup> It is also important to note

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<sup>221</sup> Matthew Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), viii.

<sup>222</sup> Brandon Mastromartino, Wen-hao Winston Chou, and James J. Zhang, “The Passion That Unites Us All: The Culture and Consumption of Sports Fans,” in *Exploring the Rise of Fandom in Contemporary Consumer Culture*, ed. Cheng Lu Wang (Hershey: IGI Global, 2017), 4.

<sup>223</sup> Garry Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 19.

<sup>224</sup> Stephen Reysen and Nyla R. Branscombe, “Fanship and Fandom: Comparisons Between Sport and Non-Sport Fans,” *Journal of Sport Behaviour* 33, no. 2 (June 2010): 177.

that the word "fan" is a shortened version of the term "fanatic," someone who is obsessed with something.

## **Fanship and Fandom**

Reysen and Branscombe also note that sport fandom has often been misconstrued with the concept of fanship. Fanship is a form of personal identity and can be described as an individual's loyalty toward a specific team, or as the authors put it, "a fan's personal connection with a sport team."<sup>225</sup> It is similar to Daniel Wann's (1997) term "team identification," which will be discussed in greater detail below. Fandom relates to a person's bond with other members of a group—or imagined community—who share a similar level of interest with the object. Fandom can be likened to Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, which broadly explains that a person's sense of who they are is dependent on the groups to which they belong.<sup>226</sup> In truth, fanship and fandom often overlap as one's personal identity is generally linked to one's social identity.

## **Team Identification**

For fans, identification with a team is reinforced by engaging in supportive and repetitive consumption behaviours like attending live matches, watching games through a form of media, and buying team gear. More so than "fans" of clothing or car brands, sport fans exhibit a strong emotional attachment to their respective teams, which is a rather unique phenomenon.<sup>227</sup> Kirk Wakefield explains this attachment: "Highly identified fans will internalize or adopt the team or

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<sup>225</sup> Reysen and Branscombe, "Fanship and Fandom," 177.

<sup>226</sup> Reysen and Branscombe, "Fanship and Fandom," 177.

<sup>227</sup> Brandon Mastromartino and James J. Zhang, "Affective Outcomes of Membership in a Sport Fan Community," *Movement Science and Sport Psychology*, (May 2020).

player's attitudes and behaviours as their own. If you are highly identified with a team, you feel good when the team wins, and bad when the team loses. You believe the team is a representation of who you are to yourself and to others. You practically feel as though you are part of the team."<sup>228</sup> As Wakefield points out, when a fan watches their team lose, they are likely to experience intense negative responses. This can even include depression.<sup>229</sup> They can become so impassioned with their team that it truly becomes a part of their identity, thus regularly affecting their emotional state and psychological well-being.<sup>230</sup> A fan's attachment to their team can be called team identification, which Wann describes as "the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team's performances are viewed as self-relevant."<sup>231</sup> For many, team identification is both a crucial and powerful element of their sense of self.

As professional sport continues to hold significant appeal and influence globally, it is important to understand the behaviour of fans. Why do they act the way they do? Many non-sports fans simply do not understand fans' obsession with their teams — "it's just a game," they say. They wonder why sports fans are so enthusiastically devoted to their teams and endure a rollercoaster of emotions, particularly when it is assured that—barring a tie—for a team to win, another must lose. While one fanbase feels euphoria as a result of their team's victory, the

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<sup>228</sup> Kirk L. Wakefield, *Team Sports Marketing* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007), 37.

<sup>229</sup> Daniel L. Wann, "Examining the Potential Causal Relationship Between Sport Team Identification and Psychological Well-being," *Journal of Sport Behaviour* 29, no. 1 (March 2006): 89.

<sup>230</sup> Shirley Wang, "Sports Complex: The Science Behind Fanatic Behavior," Association for Psychological Science, May 1, 2006.

<sup>231</sup> Daniel L. Wann, "The Causes and Consequences of Sport Team Identification," in *Handbook of Sports and Media*, ed. Arthur A. Raney and Bryant Jennings (London: Routledge, 2006), 332.

opposing fanbase, in turn, suffers defeat. Is this a worthwhile investment of one's time? Wann describes the uniqueness of being a fan as "a voluntary activity where half of the people aren't going to like the product when they've finished consuming it. You wouldn't go see a movie if you thought there was a 50/50 chance you wouldn't like it."<sup>232</sup> Evidently, team identification encompasses more than just rooting for a team to win, because every team eventually loses. That is just the nature of sport. Wann contrasts this with the following metaphor: "if a pizza restaurant continually got your order wrong, you'd likely switch to a more reliable parlor. But because being a fan is so central to people's identities, people are willing to accept defeat and continue to be loyal to a team."<sup>233</sup> Highly identified fans are also more likely to have been socialized to sport from an early age, which is why they view it as more than "just a game." Instead, it represents more of a nostalgic experience to them. For many, team identification evokes fond childhood memories.<sup>234</sup>

### **A Sense of Belonging**

Another attraction of being a fan is the sense of belonging and social connectedness that comes from being part of a fanbase, a community in itself.<sup>235</sup> Connecting spectators to other like-minded individuals fulfills the natural human need for belonging. This shared identity can exist in many different forms. For instance, technological advancements in the 21st century mean that fan communities are no longer geographically bound. Fans can interact with each other on social

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<sup>232</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>233</sup> Cory Stieg, "Sports fans have higher self-esteem and are more satisfied with their lives (whether their teams win or lose)," *CNBC*, July 23, 2020.

<sup>234</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>235</sup> Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 52.

media, online forums, and other web-based communication platforms that are easily accessible.<sup>236</sup> It can also be as simple as seeing a fellow fan or spectator wearing the team's gear, thus allowing for an instant connection. Moreover, there is also the social factor that exists at sporting venues. Arenas and stadiums are easy places for spectators to engage with each other, while also serving as the "home" base for the entire team—including the fans.<sup>237</sup> Even though members of a fanbase may not actually know each other, the fact that they all root for the same team represents a common interest between them which makes it easier to socialize within this community. Sports historian Richard Holt highlights this commonality by explaining that it offers "a reassuring feeling of being part of something even if the crowd itself were for the greater part strangers to one another."<sup>238</sup>

Wann argues that this is a "very psychologically healthy activity."<sup>239</sup> He adds: "When we look at motivation for following a sport team, group affiliation is one of the top ones. Identifying strongly with a salient local team where other fans are in the environment—that's a benefit to social-psychological well-being."<sup>240</sup> In fact, studies show that higher identification with a team is

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<sup>236</sup> Brandon Mastromartino et al., "Conceptualizing Sense of Membership in a Sport Fan Community," *Journal of Sport Behaviour* 402, no. 3 (September 2019): 333.

<sup>237</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>238</sup> Richard Holt, "Living in the City: Working-class Communities," in *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>239</sup> Stieg, "Sports fans."

<sup>240</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

linked to significantly lower levels of alienation and loneliness and a greater degree of collective self-esteem and positive emotion.<sup>241</sup>

### **It's not all about winning**

Yet, this creates something of a paradox. How can highly identified fans maintain a positive psychological outlook if they experience significant levels of disappointment when their team loses? Is the sense of belonging that is fostered by being part of a fanbase enough to override these intense negative responses? In truth, highly identified fans are not immune from the negative feelings that arise when their team fails to win. Rather, they often adopt coping mechanisms, including reflecting on the team's past glory years, dreaming of future success, or even pinning their team's losses on outside forces—like the referees.<sup>242</sup> Another defensive mechanism that highly identified fans rely on is the repetition of games or seasons. There is always another upcoming game or season.<sup>243</sup> These strategies provide them with hope, and over time, they are better able to cope with their team's struggles and continue reaping the rewards of the social connections that stem from their sporting allegiance.<sup>244</sup>

### **Rivalries**

This sense of community, togetherness and belonging can also exist in other ways. Members of a fan community do not necessarily have to associate with each other as long as they possess a shared sense of identity. From this regard, fanbases can be likened to imagined

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<sup>241</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>242</sup> Wann, "Examining," 89.

<sup>243</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>244</sup> Wann, "Examining," 89.

communities since a fan's membership to the community is primarily based on an imaged sense of belonging.<sup>245</sup> It is this mentality, or collective imagery, that bonds fans together. These shared values signal that spectators not only identify with their preferred team but also with the fan community.<sup>246</sup> Moreover, research reveals that identification with a fan community also occurs when an individual feels connected to other members of the community, while also feeling a sense of difference from "outsiders"—like fans of other teams.<sup>247</sup> In other words, fan communities can be defined by opposition to other groups and patterns of exclusion, as Abercrombie and Longhurst argue:

The significance of communities ... lies in the way in which people think about their relationships with other people that they deem to belong to the same community. Critical to this process of imagination is some notion of a boundary between one imagined community and another. 'Community' is essentially a relational concept; communities are defined in relation to one another as well as by the quality of the relationships internal to the community. Therefore, the feeling of being critical to the sense of community is constructed as much by not belonging to some imagined entity as much as it is by belonging to one.<sup>248</sup>

Feelings of belonging and exclusion regarding a fan community help explain sporting allegiances and rivalries. Broadly speaking, almost every team has at least one opponent that it considers to be its rival. Rivalries are often characterized by intense competition and animosity between the teams. Research shows that some of the most common rivalry elements between teams in North American sports leagues include: frequency of competition, defining moments, recent and

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<sup>245</sup> Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 53.

<sup>246</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>247</sup> Mastromartino and Zhang, "Affective Outcomes."

<sup>248</sup> Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 54.

historical parity, geography, relative dominance, competition for personnel, and cultural similarity and difference.<sup>249</sup>

In Canada, NHL team rivalries sometimes intersect with the politics of national identity and cultural resistance. The Montreal Canadiens, for example, have historically symbolized French Canadian and Quebecois identity. In fact, when the team first formed in 1909, it was “exclusively for players who [spoke] French.”<sup>250</sup> Anglophone Quebec, meanwhile, was represented by the Montreal Wanderers (1903-1918) and the Montreal Maroons (1924-1938), while English Canada had the Toronto Maple Leafs.<sup>251</sup> The Montreal Canadiens also had a heated rivalry with the Quebec Nordiques between 1979 and 1995, known as the “Battle of Quebec.”<sup>252</sup> This rivalry took on a form of political symbolism in terms of Quebec sovereignty. Canadiens’ supporters were viewed as more “federalist,” while Nordiques’ fans were depicted as more separatist and Péquistes.<sup>253</sup> As the NHL’s oldest teams, the rivalry between the Montreal Canadiens and Toronto Maple Leafs continues to this day, although it is no longer directly characterized by the cultural and linguistic dualities of Canadian society.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> B. David Tyler and Joe B. Cobbs, “Rival conceptions of rivalry: why some competitions mean more than others,” *European Sport Management Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (February 2015): 227.

<sup>250</sup> Glen M. E. Duerr, “Playing for the ‘Bleu et Blanc’ or for the Habs: Ice Hockey and Quebecois Nationalism,” *Central European Journal of Canadian Studies* 10, no. 11 (2016): 22.

<sup>251</sup> Duerr, “Playing for the,” 22.

<sup>252</sup> Duerr, “Playing for the,” 23.

<sup>253</sup> Jeff Z. Klein, “The Good Friday Brawl,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2008.

<sup>254</sup> Duerr, “Playing for the,” 22.



Regardless of how they arise, rivalries are a crucial component of fan identity, which is why professional sports leagues view them as integral. In 2016, Major League Soccer (MLS) Commissioner Don Garber expressed a similar viewpoint: “rivalries are a big part of our strategy. Our highest rated television events are our rivalry matches. So, rivalries are important.”<sup>255</sup> Outside of North America, rivalries that stem from conflicts relating to ethnic, religious or nationalist divisions are more common, especially in places with long histories of political and cultural conflict. For example, in Spain’s La Liga, issues surrounding regionalism, separatism, and repressed nationalism are consistent features, with Futbol Club Barcelona representing Catalonia’s political struggle for independence. In contrast, Real Madrid Club de Fútbol symbolizes historically Castilian-Spanish nationalism.<sup>256</sup> In Scotland, sectarianism is highly visible in the fierce rivalry between the supporters of Glasgow’s two biggest clubs, Celtic Football Club and Rangers Football Club. Most Celtic fans identify as Catholic, in contrast to the Protestant Rangers’ supporters.<sup>257</sup>

Rivalries are also crucial because of the economic value that they possess. They are a valuable marketing tool designed to hook consumers—sports fans—onto a product. In the MLS, rather than wait for rivalries to form organically, the league has attempted to create rivalries

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<sup>255</sup> Gideon Nachman, “Is it possible to manufacture a football rivalry? MLS has tried ...,” *Guardian*, May 29, 2017.

<sup>256</sup> Dave Russell, “The historical significance of Locality and Regional Identity to Football,” in *Routledge Handbook of Football Studies*, ed. John Hughson et al. (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 18.

<sup>257</sup> Russell, “The historical significance,” 18. Known as the *Old Firm*, the rivalry between Celtic FC and Rangers FC is underpinned by bitter sectarian tensions that predate the existence of both clubs. Historically, the Old Firm derby has served as a proxy for the divide between Catholics and Protestants, reflecting the conflict in neighbouring Northern Ireland—a country with whom Scotland has close cultural ties.

between many of its teams.<sup>258</sup> It has regularly relied on one of the most common rivalry factors—geographical proximity—in its quest to do so. For example, the Cascadia Cup is a competition between the three teams based in the Pacific Northwest (Vancouver Whitecaps Football Club, Portland Timbers, and Seattle Sounders Football Club).<sup>259</sup> Similarly, the Rocky Mountain Cup is a competition that pits the Colorado Rapids and Real Salt Lake against each other. The importance of rivalries can also be seen in how MLS has expanded. New franchises were added in New York (New York City Football Club in 2013) and Los Angeles (Los Angeles Football Club in 2014), despite both cities already having MLS teams. This demonstrates the league’s attempt to create crosstown rivalries in viable markets.

For its part, the Canadian Premier League (CPL) is also promoting and manufacturing intense competition between some of its teams in order to generate more animosity and passion. The CPL has billed matches between Forge FC and York United as the “905 Derby,” referencing their common area code.<sup>260</sup> Similarly, games between the two Alberta-based clubs—Cavalry FC and FC Edmonton—are promoted as “Al Classico,” a play on the “El Clásico,” the name for Barcelona and Real Madrid matches. These fixtures have also been dubbed the “Battle of Alberta,” a historic term seen with Calgary-Edmonton matchups in both the CFL and NHL.

### **Significance of Locality**

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<sup>258</sup> Brian Palmer, “How Much Is a Sports Rivalry Worth?” *Slate*, August 2, 2013.

<sup>259</sup> Palmer, “How Much Is.” When the Cascadia Cup was first contested in 2004, the three teams (Vancouver, Portland, and Seattle) had yet to join MLS and were still playing in the A-League/USL First Division. However, this longstanding rivalry carried into MLS.

<sup>260</sup> Davis, “Canadian Premier League.”

Crucial to this discussion is the importance of local identities to sport. Sports teams have long represented and reflected particular locations and local identities.<sup>261</sup> For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the local hockey rink was a focal point for the expression of small-town Canadian identity. This was particularly the case for working class men, as the local rink served as a cultural site where they could exercise their masculinity.<sup>262</sup> In England, a country with a rich and deep soccer tradition, support for local soccer clubs has been historically strong.<sup>263</sup> Soccer clubs have long been associated with their community, embodying the collective spirit and identity of the local population. As such, clubs became sites for community representation and provided their local population with the opportunity to engage in expressions of common identity.<sup>264</sup>

Prior to the 1950s, logistical and technological limitations ensured that local clubs in Britain were well supported.<sup>265</sup> For instance, midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were only 2.2 million private cars in Britain. However, by 1970, this figure had already reached 11.5 million.<sup>266</sup> The rapid growth of personal car ownership provided spectators with more opportunities to travel and watch non-local clubs further away. Another limitation that existed was the fact that television sets were viewed as luxury items at the time, with only 350,000

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<sup>261</sup> Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 52.

<sup>262</sup> Crawford, *Consuming Sport*, 52.

<sup>263</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19.

<sup>264</sup> Adam Brown, Tim Crabbe, and Gavin Mellor, "English Professional Football and its Communities," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2006): 161.

<sup>265</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19.

<sup>266</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 339-340.

British households able to access a television in 1950. Yet, by 1970 almost every household in Britain had at least one television.<sup>267</sup> The proliferation of television made it possible to embrace a club to which an individual had no territorial connection. Despite these trends, support for local clubs continued to remain strong after the 1950s.<sup>268</sup> A 1994 study of English Premier League (EPL) fans found that 65 per cent of respondents remained loyal to their hometown club.<sup>269</sup> A similar study conducted in 2010 also showed that 65 per cent of English Football League (EFL) fans supported their local club.<sup>270</sup> Undoubtedly, there is a relationship that exists between playing success and the total support a club garners, which helps explain why a few of the biggest English clubs (e.g., Manchester United Football Club and Liverpool Football Club) have drawn high levels of support nationally and overseas. For the most part, however, fan support of local clubs has been and continues to be a fundamental part of the English game, even when it means rooting for an unsuccessful side.<sup>271</sup> As discussed earlier, this is a decision that many fans and spectators alike willingly make for a variety of reasons.

### **Team Names**

Historically, most English clubs originated with names that represented their geographical community, such as a town, city, or an area within a city. This meant that clubs

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<sup>267</sup> Mark Clapson, *The Routledge Companion to Britain in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 385.

<sup>268</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19.

<sup>269</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19.

<sup>270</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19. The English Football League (EFL) is the umbrella body that governs the second, third and fourth tiers of English soccer, beneath the top-flight known as the English Premier League.

<sup>271</sup> Russell, "The historical significance," 19.

were, in essence, tasked with representing their local population.<sup>272</sup> Some English clubs have also articulated local identity in team names, such as Arsenal Football Club, which references the club's origins among workers of the Royal Arsenal armament factory in Woolwich.<sup>273</sup> In the major North American sports leagues, however, most teams are generally named after the city or broader geographical area in which they compete.<sup>274</sup> Many Canadian Premier League (CPL) teams, however, are not named after their home cities but after identifiable features of these communities. For instance, Forge FC evokes Hamilton's "Steel City" heritage and Valour FC is inspired by three Winnipeggers who served in the First World War. Similarly, Cavalry FC honours the Calgary-area's military history and the first responders and armed service members who serve the region and country.<sup>275</sup>

The CPL opted to develop a unique brand identity for such teams using non-traditional, esoteric naming. CPL Vice-President of Marketing Roy Nasrallah explains this approach: "When you look at the market from a North American perspective, particularly from a marketing perspective, [our thinking is] how can you break through the noise and make a statement for a [new] league when [there are] leagues [that] have existed for 100 years. We want to be unique, and we want to be authentic."<sup>276</sup> Most people would not recognize that "Forge FC" represents a

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<sup>272</sup> Brown, Crabbe, and Mellor, "English Professional Football," 161.

<sup>273</sup> "Why is Arsenal's nickname 'The Gunners'? Club term & badge explained," *Sporting News*, March 4, 2020.

<sup>274</sup> Donald L. Alexander and William Kern, "The Economic Determinants of Professional Sports Franchise Values," *Journal of Sports Economics* 5, no. 1 (February 2004): 52.

<sup>275</sup> Daniel Austin, "'Cavalry FC' the Canadian Premier League team in Calgary," *Calgary Sun*, May 17, 2018.

<sup>276</sup> Nasrallah, interview.

team from Hamilton, but there is a deeper meaning to consider. Hamilton’s historical reputation has centred on it being Canada’s top steel-producing city. Since steel is “forged,” the name “Forge FC” evokes the city’s industrial roots in order to connect with the local community through this appeal to heritage.

As mentioned above, another approach to team naming involves adopting regional identities. Some professional sports teams in North America, like the New England Patriots, embody such regional naming.<sup>277</sup> The Patriots play in the small town of Foxborough, Massachusetts, with a population of roughly 17,000, about 20 miles from Boston and Providence, Rhode Island. No other professional football teams play in the New England region, enabling the “New England” name to represent an entire region and its population. The “New England” name also boosts its marketability and scope for a fanbase. Pacific FC, the CPL club based in Langford—one of Greater Victoria’s thirteen municipalities—functions similarly. “Pacific FC” allows all British Columbians to feel a degree of attachment to the team and presents the club as the province’s CPL team, thus expanding its reach.<sup>278</sup>

### **Local Players**

Another factor to consider is that local players help bond a club to its community.<sup>279</sup> Fans generally love seeing local players rise through the ranks to land a spot in their first team. A

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<sup>277</sup> Donald L. Alexander and William Kern, “The Economic Determinants of Professional Sports Franchise Values,” *Journal of Sports Economics* 5, no. 1 (February 2004): 56.

<sup>278</sup> In November 2021, the CPL announced that an expansion team would be coming to Vancouver for the 2023 season.

<sup>279</sup> Rory Smith, “At Global Clubs, Local Players Serve as Connective Tissue,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2018.

2019 survey of English Football League supporters found that 86 per cent thought it important for clubs to nurture and promote homegrown talent.<sup>280</sup> The English game, however, has become less rooted in locality in recent decades. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a strong emphasis on youth development, which saw clubs regularly promote local or regional players through their academy systems. Yet, over the last few decades, clubs—particularly those at the highest levels—have been drawing on national and international players far more frequently. Consequently, fans have come to expect that their teams will predominantly be composed of “mercenaries.”<sup>281</sup> But, while many top soccer clubs are now globally recognizable brands with widespread appeal, at their roots, they are still local institutions that represent a place and reflect the identities of these people. For instance, Athletic Club, a team in Spain’s La Liga, is situated in the Basque region and only recruits and signs players from the surrounding Basque Country.<sup>282</sup> This trust in local talent is even apparent in Athletic Club’s motto, “Con cantera y afición, no hace falta importación” (“with home-grown talent and local support, there’s no need for imports”). By adhering to this tradition, the club has consistently promoted the values and culture of the Basque people, endearing itself to its fans and local residents.<sup>283</sup> It is, however, rare in the world of professional sports for a team to forge an ethnic identity in the way that Athletic Club has done.

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<sup>280</sup> “2019 Supporters Survey,” English Football League.

<sup>281</sup> Russell, “The historical significance,” 21.

<sup>282</sup> Duerr, “Playing for the,” 22.

<sup>283</sup> Rory Smith, “Being More Like Athletic Bilbao,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2020.

## Player Quotas

When Major League Soccer (MLS) launched, there was a league-wide mandate to promote American players. This meant strict limits on the number of international players allowed, with each team only allowed four foreigners during the league's inaugural season. MLS also understood this as a way to build support among fans, who preferred domestic players since they could relate to them more.<sup>284</sup> This approach was in stark contrast to its predecessor, the North American Soccer League (NASL) and its free-spending strategy of recruiting foreign players. Nick Owcharuk, a former NASL player, mocked the league at the time, saying: "NASL doesn't mean North American Soccer League, it means Non-American Soccer League."<sup>285</sup> During its early stages, MLS opted to privilege domestic talent, with one of its key founders, Alan Rothenberg, arguing in 1995: "Why did the [NASL] fail? It sold short-term curiosity. The novelty of seeing world-renowned imported stars soon wore off. This time around MLS will rely on the greater pool of top home-grown talent to provide local heroes for the young kids to support."<sup>286</sup> Rothenberg's statement is debateable, given that much else—discussed previously—led to the NASL's demise. Moreover, after a decade, MLS loosened its roster regulations

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<sup>284</sup> John D. Francis and Congcong Zheng, "Learning Vicariously From Failure: The Case of Major League Soccer and the Collapse of the North American Soccer League," *Group and Organization Management* 35, no. 5 (October 2010): 558.

<sup>285</sup> Francis and Zheng, "Learning Vicariously," 557.

<sup>286</sup> Francis and Zheng, "Learning Vicariously," 558.



pertaining to foreign players to attract more international stars.<sup>287</sup> Yet, it remains important that teams also appeal to their local communities, in part by supporting local players.<sup>288</sup>

The Canadian Premier League (CPL) has branded itself as a league “for Canadians, by Canadians.” This tagline is more than marketing sizzle. The CPL’s roster requirements for Canadian players in its inaugural season were highly robust. It mandated that 50 per cent plus one of each club’s players must be Canadian, with a limit of seven foreign nationals. Each team also had to start at least six Canadians per game. A team could have a maximum of five foreign players in their starting lineup. There also needed to be a minimum of three Canadians aged 21 or under in each club’s squad, and those three players were required to play a combined minimum of 1,000 minutes per season.<sup>289</sup> The CPL’s first commissioner, David Clanachan, explained the importance of these restrictions: “The team owners were clear – this had to be about developing Canadians. We put very serious handcuffs on what rosters could look like. This is all about giving the young people a great chance, where they can see a light at the end of the tunnel and something to aspire to.”<sup>290</sup>

### **Supporters’ Groups**

Supporters’ groups can be described as a collective of fans who organize themselves into a defined social entity in order to cheer for their team. They promote their team in an official or

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<sup>287</sup> Francis and Zheng, “Learning Vicariously,” 558.

<sup>288</sup> Daniel A. Nathan, *Rooting for the Home Team: Sport, Community, and Identity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>289</sup> John Molinaro, “Canadian Premier League FAQ: What you need to know,” *Sportsnet*, April 24, 2019.

<sup>290</sup> Davis, “Canadian Premier League.”

unofficial capacity, and they exist in numerous forms.<sup>291</sup> These groups are most common in South American and European soccer leagues, although their influence has spread globally, including North America. Supporters' groups are sometimes called “ultras,” a term derived from the Latin word “ultrā” meaning “beyond,” indicating that their fanatical support is “beyond” the norm.<sup>292</sup> Supporters’ groups play active roles through their enthusiastic and passionate support in large groups to visibly demonstrate their fanship and fandom. They excel at generating an atmosphere in stadiums in order to encourage their team, while fostering a hostile environment for their opponents. Members sing, display flags and banners in the stands during games; they also fundraise for the team and organize pre-match events for fans.<sup>293</sup> Though supporters’ groups are not always directly affiliated with their teams, it is common for them to liaise with team officials. This working relationship not only allows the team to improve its ties with its supporters, but it benefits the organization in many other ways as well. For instance, members of supporters’ groups can sponsor and host events, promote the team on social media, and help at the stadium on matchdays. Supporters’ groups also attend away games, ensuring the team has vocal backing for these games.

It is important to distinguish between the various types of supporters’ groups. These include supporters’ groups that form: i) around a particular professional sports team (e.g., La Doce supporters’ group for Boca Juniors [Argentinean soccer team]; ii) around a national team

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<sup>291</sup> Bruce David Tyler, “Fan Communities and Subgroups: Exploring Individuals' Supporter Group Experiences” (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2013), 3.

<sup>292</sup> Graham Ruthven, “MLS Ultras: plastic wannabes or sign of a thriving league?” *Guardian*, September 25, 2018.

<sup>293</sup> Tyler, “Fan Communities and Subgroups,” 3.

for a single sport (e.g., the Voyageurs, the supporters' group for Canada's national soccer teams); or iii) around a national team across multiple sports (e.g., the Fanatics, Australian fans who support Australian teams and athletes across several sports).<sup>294</sup> At times, however, some supporters' groups worldwide have been condemned for their acts of violence and hooliganism. Franklin Foer argues that this stems from the fact soccer is still rooted in the local, with a fan's team identification defining who they are as a person. Foer adds:

Compare European soccer with American sporting teams. Our teams represent such broad geographic areas, and don't really represent anything local. What truly differentiates a Yankees from a Mets fan? I'm not sure. But in Buenos Aires, everyone knows what separates a Boca Juniors fan from a River Plate fan — there's a stark difference in class. Buenos Aires has something like eight different teams, so each team represents a distinct neighbourhood, and when you represent something that local, you're representing very particular identities — class, ethnicity.<sup>295</sup>

Since the 1920s, there have been more than 300 soccer-related deaths in Argentina, with well over a hundred of these occurring since the late 1990s.<sup>296</sup> Consequently, in 2013, away fans were banned in all divisions of Argentine soccer, although the rule was relaxed in 2018.<sup>297</sup> The Argentinian example is just one of many on a global scale. From this perspective, it is little wonder George Orwell viewed sport as a destructive force that triggers violence, once likening it

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<sup>294</sup> Tyler, "Fan Communities and Subgroups," 3.

<sup>295</sup> Bradford Plumer, "How Soccer Explains the World," *Mother Jones*, August 4, 2004.

<sup>296</sup> Mike Meehall Wood, "Why The Copa Libertadores Riot Goes Much Further Than Just River And Boca," *Forbes*, November 27, 2018.

<sup>297</sup> Jonathan Wilson, "How Argentinian football had the chance to prove it had changed — and blew it," *Guardian*, November 26, 2018.

to “war minus the shooting.”<sup>298</sup> Certain supporters’ groups have, at times, expressed their belligerent behaviour through homophobic and xenophobic chanting, vile insults, and/or threats to murder rivals. Unfortunately, soccer hooliganism oversteps the mark and takes fanaticism much too far, as Foer notes: “Soccer has this dark side associated with its fan culture, because the clubs represent so much more than just what city you live in.”<sup>299</sup>

On the other hand, many supporters’ groups have also played an active role in their local communities and provided a sense of togetherness.<sup>300</sup> For instance, supporters’ groups have played a crucial role in the early stages of the Canadian Premier League (CPL), particularly since most developed organically within fan communities. In fact, several supporters’ groups predated the existence of their respective teams and the league itself. In early 2018, more than a year before its launch, CPL officials knew about 16 different supporters’ groups across the country. One might wonder how this is even possible. How could a supporters’ group exist before there was even a team to support? In 2018, then-CPL President Paul Beirne, explained:

We haven't made those [supporters’ groups]. They've emerged on their own. This is exactly the organic type of connection that people have to their club. And this is exactly why we're very bullish about it. As an example, there's a city right next to Toronto called Mississauga. Mississauga has a supporters’ group. We don't have an owner [there]. We don't have a building [stadium]. We don't have a project there. We just have a supporters’ group. But what they've done is stir the public's imagination, and they're doing a great job of poking local politicians and making the creation of a public space for the purpose of playing football [soccer] matches a priority for their local politicians. So, it's great to see, and it's great for us

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<sup>298</sup> Peter J. Beck, “‘War Minus the Shooting’: George Orwell on International Sport and the Olympics,” *Sport in History* 33, no. 1 (January 2013): 83.

<sup>299</sup> Frank Bures, “Soccerworld,” *Atlantic*, July 2004.

<sup>300</sup> Tyler, “Fan Communities and Subgroups,” 4.

to be able to point to that as we go and try to encourage new owners to come out of the  
woodwork and get involved with this [league].<sup>301</sup>

In soccer, there is a unique sense of togetherness that can organically develop when fans unite to form a supporters' group, especially if no team even exists at the time. It is inspiring to witness the gradual progression of a few individuals who convene at a local bar or through social media platforms, and later form a supporters' group through community outreach. This natural growth helps create an unmistakably authentic identity and culture for the group. Valour FC's supporters' group is named Red River Rising, and one of its founders, Adam Johnston, recounts how the group first formed: "I saw that supporters' groups were forming in Halifax and Hamilton in 2016, and I thought, 'I wonder if there are any supporters' groups in Winnipeg?' I made a Twitter account to see if there was any interest and there certainly was. We had our first meeting in January 2017 and the rest was history."<sup>302</sup> Johnston was ecstatic when Winnipeg was awarded a CPL team. Since Red River Rising's creation, the group has met monthly at a local pub, Garbonzo's Pizza Pub, to converse and plan activities, rehearse chants, and design banners.<sup>303</sup> Red River Rising's slogan, "Rise Together," highlights the group's emphasis on unity and equality, seen with each member having a vote on such topics as songs and logos.<sup>304</sup> Johnston also points out that the group is more than just a fan community, noting it articulates a

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<sup>301</sup> Paul Beirne, "A new leaf for Canadian Soccer," in *Sport: Digital and Social*, hosted by Richard Clarke, podcast audio, May 5, 2018.

<sup>302</sup> Armen Bedakian, "'Rise Together': Winnipeg's Red River Rising establishing traditions ahead of CPL launch," Canadian Premier League, August 3, 2018.

<sup>303</sup> Bedakian, "'Rise Together': Winnipeg."

<sup>304</sup> Bedakian, "'Rise Together': Winnipeg."

larger vision for the sport in their city: “I think one of the key motivations with Red River Rising is that we want to leave a legacy. We’re building something in Winnipeg—not only Valour FC building pro soccer, but also with our supporters’ group. We want to build a strong legacy and build a unique soccer culture in a city that’s often known for hockey. We believe that Winnipeg can grow to be a true soccer culture for generations to come.”<sup>305</sup>

In Alberta, the situation was somewhat different since both Edmonton and Calgary had soccer teams in US-based leagues before the CPL’s existence. In 2015, Calgary Foothills FC joined the Premier Development League (PDL), a developmental US-based soccer league.<sup>306</sup> There was plenty of enthusiasm for the new PDL team in Calgary, and this led to the creation of the Foot Soldiers Supporters’ Group in 2014. But how did the group form? The use of social media was once again pivotal. One of the group’s founding members, Sean Clarke, explains how the group first came together: “I thought I’d set up a Twitter account. I went for dinner with my wife and came back and it already had over a hundred followers and quite a bit of activity for just being a few hours old, so I took it and ran with it.”<sup>307</sup> Members of the Foot Soldiers Supporters’ Group regularly convened at the Ship and Anchor, a Calgary pub, before making their way to the stadium to watch their team play.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Bedakian, “‘Rise Together’: Winnipeg.”

<sup>306</sup> United Soccer League, “USL Unveils New Structure: One Central Brand, Three Leagues, Evolving for the Future,” September 25, 2018.

<sup>307</sup> Canadian Premier League, “Foot Soldiers SG hoping to make CPL matches a ‘destination’ in Calgary,” August 3, 2018.

<sup>308</sup> Canadian Premier League, “Foot Soldiers SG.”

When murmurs first began about a possible CPL team in Calgary, the Foot Soldiers Supporters' Group faced a difficult decision, as Clarke recounts: "As the CPL chatter kind of rose through the offseason, we talked about it and asked how we were going to move forward with this. Do we want to support Cavalry FC, or will a new group step in? We all decided we're all-in on Cavalry."<sup>309</sup> When Cavalry FC was officially unveiled as one of the CPL's inaugural teams, the excitement was palpable, as the group's members "all went to the Ship and Anchor patio and had a few celebratory drinks."<sup>310</sup> Like Red River Rising, Clarke wants the sport and Cavalry FC to become a fabric of the city's sporting culture: "I want soccer to become the destination for people who want to have a good time at a game, as compared to other sports in the city where it's a status thing. People at our stadium truly care about it ... hopefully it'll grow year over year and with time, word of mouth gets out that this is the place to be."<sup>311</sup>

### **Creating Demand**

In order to create demand and attract fans, the league must have a good value proposition. In professional sports, market research shows that new teams can make their on-field success a secondary focus as long as they make their fans feel like they are part of the team and, by extension, part of a social group.<sup>312</sup> While winning remains a top marketing tool, fans also value a strong sense of community. In other words, fans are more likely to accept a team's disappointing results if made to feel like an extended member of the team.<sup>313</sup> How can this be

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<sup>309</sup> Canadian Premier League, "Foot Soldiers SG."

<sup>310</sup> Canadian Premier League, "Foot Soldiers SG."

<sup>311</sup> Canadian Premier League, "Foot Soldiers SG."

<sup>312</sup> Mastromartino et al., "Conceptualizing Sense," 334.

<sup>313</sup> Mastromartino et al., "Conceptualizing Sense," 334.

achieved? Ryan Zapalac argues that a viable strategy for this is to make the team accessible. This can include player autograph and selfie sessions, guided tours of the team's facilities, birthday announcements on the scoreboard, exclusive merchandise and prizes, and other interactive activities and experiences. In the end, the goal is to increase the fans' connection to the team. Zapalac adds: "If you provide accessibility to the community, you make people feel as though that player is a part of the community."<sup>314</sup>

The fans' matchday experience is also crucial to this. Unlike the North American Soccer League, which saw many teams playing in venues that were simply too big to fill, most Canadian Premier League (CPL) teams play in stadiums currently ranging between 5,000 and 10,000-seat capacities. While this might seem small, the fans' experience is arguably enhanced in a more compact setting. A big venue with a sparse crowd is not conducive to an energetic atmosphere. According to the CPL's Director of Licensing Jim Neish, "if you don't have to play in a 30,000-seat stadium, don't. Now, Forge FC and Valour FC can't do that [as they play in Canadian Football League stadiums], but it's [about] creating those intimate experiences in Calgary, Edmonton and Halifax that will keep people coming back week after week after week, and then creating demand that you can build and grow off of."<sup>315</sup> During the CPL's inaugural season, the league collectively had more than 400,000 attendees, with a respectable average attendance of 4,279.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Wang, "Sports Complex."

<sup>315</sup> Neish, interview.

<sup>316</sup> Williams, "Canadian Premier League off to solid start."



## Conclusion

Sports teams are a vehicle for fans to engage with each other, as well as with the team. They help foster a sense of togetherness—a key component of all fan communities. After Celtic defeated Rangers 3-0 in February 2022, the Celtic manager Ange Postecoglou said: “I’m sure a lot [of our fans] walked in with some problems in their lives and during these 95 minutes, we made them forget that and feel good. That’s something special.”<sup>317</sup> Postecoglou’s post-game comments illustrate the impact that a victory in a rivalry match can have for highly identified fans. Supporting a local team provides a way for the community to unite and demonstrate support of a common cause, boosting the spirits of local residents in the process. With soccer continuing to be deeply entrenched in the local, teams often provide fans with a feeling of belonging—as a resident member of a community. Some CPL teams like Cavalry FC, Forge FC and Valour FC, have adopted esoteric team names to instill a deeper connection with local fans by invoking the history or character of their respective cities. Another team, Pacific FC, adopted a name linking the team to an entire region. The league has also encouraged rivalries between teams in close geographic proximity, such as the “905 Derby” and the “Al Classico.” A strict player quota ensures that fans can support Canadian—and sometimes local—talent on the field. As discussed above, supporting a team entails more than focusing on winning performances. Every team is bound to lose at some point, and there can only be one league champion at the end of each season. It is, therefore, important for teams to identify ways to engage with their fans, making them feel that they are part of the team. A burgeoning soccer supporter culture exists in Canada, as demonstrated by the organic development of more than a dozen supporters’ groups

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<sup>317</sup> Nick McPheat, “Celtic 3-0 Rangers: Ange Postecoglou says side 'made fans forget their problems',” *BBC*, February 3, 2022.

prior to the launch of the CPL. Accordingly, the league and its teams treat these fan communities as key stakeholders. They are crucial to the success of the league and merit a voice at the table.

## **Conclusion**

Before the launch of the Canadian Premier League (CPL), Canada was the world's largest economy without a top-tier, national professional soccer league.<sup>318</sup> For decades, elite teen Canadian soccer players were stymied—with little shot at a professional career in the sport. Most had no choice but to go overseas in order to play at the professional level. Many others simply quit and stopped pursuing their dreams. Top-tier, professional soccer leagues involving Canadian teams have come and gone during the past fifty years, including the North American Soccer League, Canadian Soccer League, and Canadian Professional Soccer League. For the CPL to achieve long-term success, it must avoid the pitfalls of its predecessors and ensure that it is organizationally sound. This entails avoiding ownership instability, rapid overexpansion, and run-away player salaries, factors which contributed to the demise of previous leagues. Working in the CPL's favour is the league's committed cast of ownership groups and a growing appetite for soccer in Canada, especially at youth levels.

In the past, limited television coverage has doomed many sports leagues. However, in the modern digital age, there are ways around this issue. While traditional multichannel television providers have long controlled the sports broadcasting industry, OTT streaming services now pose a serious challenge to their dominance. In fact, some of the world's best soccer leagues, like the English Premier League, are currently only available to Canadian viewers through a subscription to an OTT streaming service. With sports coverage rapidly pivoting towards OTT streaming services and pay-TV customers cutting the cord at a fast clip, traditional multichannel television providers have belatedly begun to unbundle sports packages to reduce costs for

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<sup>318</sup> Kloke, "Will the Canadian Premier League."

customers. But while they delayed and dithered, dedicated OTT sports streaming services like DAZN have laid the groundwork for future success. It can be argued that without significant access to traditional television markets, the CPL risks limiting its potential for growth. At the same time, however, OneSoccer provides the CPL with a specialized platform to deliver the bulk of its content. With the league targeting younger audiences, an OTT streaming service is arguably the way forward.

Attracting fans is of course a major priority for the CPL. Low game attendance was a common factor in the downfall of previous soccer leagues such as the North American Soccer League and Canadian Soccer League. Fans are the lifeblood of any sporting organization. Highly identified fans and members of supporters' groups invest emotionally and economically in their team. This (often lifelong) commitment provides them with a sense of social connectedness and belonging derived from being a part of a fan community. While fans typically want their team to be successful on the field, they also want to feel an attachment to the team. In order to foster this kind of sentiment, some CPL teams have recognized the importance of locality by articulating historic links to their city with their team naming. The league is also promoting rivalries between teams in nearby cities. Rivalries are an important aspect of fan identity, while also having commercial value. The CPL has positioned and marketed itself as a truly Canadian product in hopes of resonating with fans, highlighted by a Canadian player quota. The nascent CPL has a strong fan culture, as evidenced by the fact that many supporters' groups formed before the start of the league or the launch of their team. The key is to build on that backbone of support and ensure that fans remain important stakeholders as the league continues to grow.

The CPL’s goal is to become one of the top three leagues in CONCACAF, alongside Major League Soccer and Mexico’s Liga MX.<sup>319</sup> Its ultimate goal is to have 14 to 16 teams, along with a second tier that would operate under the CPL.<sup>320</sup> The league’s first commissioner, David Clanachan, pointed out that by 2026, “a promotion and relegation model” could be in place.<sup>321</sup> That year, Canada will co-host the FIFA World Cup, alongside the US and Mexico. With the prestige of co-hosting this high-profile event, there will be plenty of attention on Canadian men’s soccer during the next few years. Fortunately, the national team has recently changed course.<sup>322</sup> A new crop of exciting young talent has emerged, spearheaded by Alphonso Davies and Jonathan David. With qualification to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar secured, there is a growing feeling that Canada could be on the verge of establishing itself as a true soccer nation—something that seemed unfathomable a decade ago after that wretched 8-0 loss in Honduras.

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<sup>319</sup> Neil Davidson, “Canadian Premier League opens up about finances, saying it's time for transparency,” *CBC*, March 8, 2021.

<sup>320</sup> Williams, “Canadian Premier League off to solid start.” In March 2021, the league awarded the exclusive rights for an expansion team in Saskatoon to Living Sky Sports and Entertainment Inc., a Saskatchewan-based company. However, the agreement is contingent on the company providing a soccer-specific stadium that meets the league’s standards, with 2023 slated to be the earliest the team could join the league. In January 2022, the league announced that its first commissioner, David Clanachan, would step down from his position after being awarded the exclusive rights for a CPL expansion team in the Windsor/Essex County region in Ontario. The agreement is contingent on the provision of a soccer-specific stadium and other expansion criteria.

<sup>321</sup> Davis, “Canadian Premier League.”

<sup>322</sup> FIFA declared the Canadian men’s national team as the “Most Improved Side” for 2021. In February 2022, the men’s national team reached its highest-ever position to date—No. 33—in the FIFA World Rankings.

While the Canadian Premier League and the Canadian Soccer Association both harbour long-term plans to create a top-tier, professional women's soccer league in Canada, a suggestion for future research is to explore the suitability and viability of such a venture. In 2018, then-CPL President Paul Beirne said: "We're going to hesitate to put a time against this [launching a professional women's league], but it's definitely something that's on our radar. But we have to walk before we run, and so the first thing we need to do is get this thing [CPL] off the ground and demonstrate that it's going to be stable and feasible and allow that first generation of support to really emerge and come to life."<sup>323</sup> This is a topic that merits further exploration and analysis.

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<sup>323</sup> Beirne, "A new leaf."

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