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Hockey's Team Canada: Some Painful History

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No one in my neighborhood ran into the streets and fired a gun in the air. The cars along the expressways were neither blinking their lights nor honking their horns. Even in the sports' bars, the community halls of sport in the late 20th century, the event passed without much notice as college football remained the central attraction late last Saturday night. Yet Wayne Gretzky called it "devastating," "a hard loss to swallow," and assumed that his countrymen were crushed.

On Saturday night sometime between eleven o'clock and midnight Canadians came face to face yet again with a terrible truth. The Canadian National Team representing the best players that could be mustered north of the 49th parallel, were defeated for the second time in three games over six nights, and the third time in four tries over the previous two weeks, by the best that could be mustered for Team USA. It was a bitter pill that not all will swallow.

It was not the first time this has happened in Canada. In 1954 the Soviet Union won the World Championships in Sweden defeating a Canadian team 7-2 in the finals. Canada and the rest of world was shocked, not so much by the outcome, which could be dismissed as resulting from a poor Canadian representative, but by the fact that the Russians had seemingly overnight elevated their game to such a high level. In addition the Soviets played a style that featured superb motion and precision passing, a non-Canadian style of the Canadian national game. A bigger shock followed at the 1956 Olympics when the Soviets defeated Canada's Kitchener Dutchmen. This one was viewed simply as a national disaster.

The Soviets went into decline until the early Sixties, and then from '63 to '71 they would win every world championship. In desperation and exasperation in 1969 Canada retreated into isolation, withdrawing from world competition, arguing that the Soviets were professionals and Canadian amateur boys would no longer be sacrificed in hockey's Cold War.

All that changed when the two nations agreed to play "The Summit Series"; eight games against each other, four in Canada and four in Russia, in September 1972. In the first game in Montreal the Canadians jumped to an early 2-0 lead and then watched in horror as the Soviets led by Valeri Kharlamov scored seven unanswered

goals, while goalie Vladislav Tretiak shutout Canada the rest of the way.

Team Canada came back to win game two, the third game was a tie, but the Russians won game four. National humiliation was within sight. In Moscow the Soviets won game one, but Canada won game two and three. Paul Henderson scored the winning goal in each of the victories. Each team had won three games, there was one tie, and a final game in Moscow would decide the issue. By then Valeri Kharlamov was gone, the victim of Bobby Clarke's slash in Game 5 that broke his ankle. Yet the brilliance of Vladislav Tretiak in goal had to leave the Canadian fans with at least some doubt.

The final game saw the Soviets build a 5-3 lead through the first two periods. Then Team Canada scored two unanswered goals and tied the game with seven minutes remaining. With less than a minute to go the score was still tied. Phil Esposito shot on goal and Tretiak made the stop, but a rebound came off and it was fired back by Paul Henderson. Again Tretiak made the stop, but again the puck rebounded to Henderson. This time Henderson was able to push the puck past the Soviet goalie with thirty-four seconds to play.

Most Canadians can tell you exactly where they were at that moment when they heard, or at least remember hearing, Foster Hewitt make the call.

This past weekend U.S. coach and Disney employee, Paul Wilson, said that the Henderson goal was probably the worst thing that ever happened to Canadian hockey. It allowed Canadians to go on believing that hockey was still their exclusive possession and let them avoid a serious overhaul of the Canadian hockey system.

Now that failure has been rewarded with a U.S. victory over Canada in the World Cup, as well as Russian and Swedish hockey parity with Canada. The aging Team Canada will probably not win another world title for several years to come as the decline of hockey in Canada continues.

The talent pool of Canadian farm boys is shrinking, while the player pool grows across the world. For Canadians there is no fallback position this time. They lost with their best. There are no others. There is no other time of year that this result would have been any different. There is, at last, no where to hide. It's time to look in the mirror.

For those in the U.S. who enjoyed this great hockey tournament and who enjoyed this victory for a growing U.S. hockey program, I can only say, do not crow too loudly. Your day will come. Someday the Dream Team will lose and you will have no fallback position to explain that one away either.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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