



THE YOUNG COLLECTOR

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HOCKEY, A FAMILY AFFAIR

When I was younger, I absolutely hated waking up early save for three reasons: fishing, Saturday morning cartoons, and road hockey: the quintessential Canadian sport.

Saturday nights were especially fun, because the Toronto Maple Leafs would most likely be playing and I enjoyed watching them - even if they were trounced repeatedly. I was a fan of Phil Kessel and wore his jersey. *Hockey Night in Canada*, with Ron Maclean and Don Cherry, will remain a fond lifelong memory.

As many Canadian children do, I played ice hockey in a family-friendly home league. Though I could barely skate forward, let alone backward, I learned persistence and had a great time. I still enjoy the opportunity to play the game at a non-competitive level in college with my buddies.

Though I could only ever dream of winning a Stanley Cup, my family does have some direct and some remarkably interesting ties to hockey history.

My mother's grandfather, Donald Burke, was the very silversmith who added new rings to the Stanley Cup year by year, as teams won the greatest prize in hockey. On my 13th birthday, my Dad took me to the Hockey Hall of Fame where the Stanley Cup resides, and I was immensely proud.

In fact, the silver tea set which Harold Ballard, then-owner of the Leafs, presented to the Leaf's team captain, Darryl Sittler, for his 10-point game on February 7, 1976 vs. The Boston Bruins was also made by my grandfather's silver-smithing compa-



ny, Burke and Wallace. The story is that Harold Ballard called my great-grandfather and said he needed something special to acknowledge this amazing feat of Sittler (which remains unmatched to this day) since he had recently publicly complained about his captain's performance.

Another interesting family connection to hockey is that my paternal great-grandfather, John Balych, a Ukrainian immigrant to Toronto, laboured on the construction crew that built Maple Leaf Gardens where the Leafs played for 67 years, from 1931-1999.

As the original six teams in the National Hockey League have since grown to thirty-one, this Canadian passion has developed its own history, which has been captured by some fascinating stamps.



The first Canadian hockey stamp is the 1956 issue featuring two players and a goalie (Scott 359). The sticks they use are wooden, and there are no helmets on any of the players, including the goalie! Not until

1959 did the first goalie, Jacques Plante of the Montreal Canadiens, wear the first mask. He began to use it during practices after a sinusitis surgery but, during a game versus the New York Rangers on November 1, 1959, his nose was broken by a flying puck. He went to the dressing room to fix his nose and returned, making history by wearing his homemade fiberglass mask.

Plante's mask can be seen on the Canadian stamp (Scott 1838f) from February of 2000.

The Original Six teams and their rivalry continue to this day. I feel I am part of that history today when the Leafs play Montreal or one of the other original teams. For



instance, I vividly remember my disappointment on May 13, 2013 when the Leafs lost their 4-1 lead against the Bruins in the first playoff round. Boston pulled goalie Tuukka Rask and, with the extra forward, scored in overtime to crush my hopes and dreams of watching the Leafs in a second-round matchup.

In 2014, Canada Post issued a set of stamps commemorating an important player from each of these original six teams: the



Toronto Maple Leafs, the Boston Bruins, the Montreal Canadiens, the Detroit Red Wings, the Chicago Blackhawks, and the New York Rangers.

My favourite of all is these stamps is the one of the Leaf's legendary defenseman, Tim Horton (Scott 2788), who died in a tragic car accident on February 21, 1974 when he opted to drive home to Buffalo from a game in Toronto, instead of taking the team bus.

Not only was Horton good on the ice, but he founded a store that has become the face of Canadian coffee. In 1964, he and his business partner, Ronald Vaughan Joyce, opened a little donut shack which grew into the quintessentially Canadian Brand, *Tim Hortons*. When non-Canadians tell me what they know about Canada, one of the first things they always talk about is *Tim Hortons*.

In 2014, when the first hockey card stamps came out, I thought that it was an interesting and tasteful blend of hockey and philately. For Christmas that year, my parents bought me a few packs of this collection, which I really loved. In fact, I still have not opened them because I can't bring myself to destroy the wrapping and packaging!

Hockey has created a lot of characters and heroes on the ice, but also a lot off the ice. One hockey parent who is recognized as a hero is Walter Gretzky, who recently passed away on March 4, 2021. I am glad I had the chance to meet him and receive his autograph a few years back at an old-timer charity hockey game held in Owen Sound, Ontario. A hockey player himself, Walter helped to coach his son Wayne Gretzky as a youth, who became the legendary goalscoring and playmaking Hall-of-Famer. Perhaps there should be a stamp commemorating the life of Walter Gretzky.

Hockey is a great Canadian sport with a living and fascinating history that is fun to explore, and I think that collecting thematic hockey stamp issues could be a great way to bring new collectors to the hobby. ☒

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