

Spectacularized Sport: Understanding the Invention of a Nostalgic, Commodified Sporting Event

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This analysis examines the commodification of the 2009 National Hockey League (NHL) Winter Classic, a professional outdoor hockey game staged in Chicago, IL, at Wrigley Field. Given the dynamic relationship between sports and corporate sponsorship, ratings, merchandise, and broadcast-rights contracts, it is critical to understand how the principles of late capitalism influence both the sport and fans in increasingly controlling ways. As a result, this study combines an understanding of the principles of production and consumption, examining how economic principles manifested themselves in the commodification of nostalgic elements and made the NHL Winter Classic the sport's most lucrative event in decades.

Keywords: NHL, nostalgia, commodification, broadcast contracts, spectacle

In 2005, after the National Hockey League (NHL) became the first sports league to cancel an entire season over a labor dispute, the future of the sport on television was in serious doubt. Even though just 7 years earlier the league had signed the richest broadcast-rights contract in its history, a 5-year deal with ESPN and ABC that paid the league roughly \$120 million per season for broadcast rights on their family of networks (Sandomir, 1998), the price for television rights had been drastically reduced to a \$60 million option for ESPN to broadcast the 2004–2005 NHL season (Martzke, 2005). When play resumed after that season was cancelled, ESPN declined their option, and every other major broadcaster shunned the NHL, already perceived as America's fourth major sport (behind the National Football League [NFL], the National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball), in fear of decreased revenues from the aftereffects of a cancelled season (Elliott, 2006).

The situation left NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman with few options. Eventually, he would strike a 3-year deal with the Comcast-owned cable network Versus, sacrificing the household reach and prestige of sports giant ESPN/ABC (Versus reaches 75 million homes, but ESPN reaches 98 million; Hiestand, 2009) for a rights contract averaging \$70 million per season (Sandomir, 2005). Realizing that the sport could slide even further out of the American consciousness without a major

network deal, Bettman also managed to corral NBC into a unique revenue-sharing broadcast agreement: NBC would pay no up-front rights fee, and the league and the network would split net revenue, an unheard agreement in the world of professional sports leagues and network television contracts.

As a result, the NHL needed something that could reinvigorate sagging ratings, bring back major advertisers, and create a media buzz for hockey that could propel the league back into the hearts, minds, and wallets of the American public. The NHL invented the Winter Classic, an outdoor hockey game that first took place in Buffalo's Ralph Wilson Stadium in 2008, as a media megaevent designed to emulate the popularity and advertising dollars of the NFL's Super Bowl. By playing a regular-season hockey game outdoors, in a large outdoor stadium, on January 1, the NHL and NBC created a unique event that lured audiences away from the college football fare that dominates sports television on the first day of every year (Lemke, 2009). The league deemed the Buffalo event a tremendous success, but the subsequent Winter Classic, held at Chicago's Wrigley Field in 2009, was even more successful, with overwhelming demand for tickets, increased merchandise sales, and the highest television ratings for a regular-season hockey game in over a decade.

This article examines how the NHL Winter Classic, now an annual tradition that requires cities and franchises to compete for hosting duties, was able to deliver the NHL a tremendous bargaining chip for its next national broadcasting-contract negotiations (the contract with NBC and Versus ends at the conclusion of the 2010–11 season). Specifically, the success of this event was predicated on the commercialization of not just sport but also American nostalgia. Although nothing is particularly classic about an annual regular-season game that has been held just twice, the naming of the event was just one of a number of strategies, including marketing the game as a return to hockey's roots and producing retro-inspired jerseys and memorabilia, that imbued the event with nostalgia as a means of profit making. Using NBC's coverage from the 2009 event that pitted two of America's oldest sports franchises, the Chicago Blackhawks and the Detroit Red Wings, this analysis will explain how the NHL was able to manufacture a successful event by commercially exploiting postmodern America's desire for the past. Expertly staged and executed, the NHL Winter Classic capitalized on nostalgic desire to further commodify its product, increase its advertising revenue, and offer potential network broadcasters the ratings bonanza of the resurgent league's biggest event. As a result, the 2009 Winter Classic in Chicago became not just another example of the economic domination of sport but also a paragon of the mediated construction-for-consumption past.

Framework

In conducting such an analysis, the framework for study follows Whannel's (2009) demand for a dual approach to understanding mediated sport:

This involves two analytically distinct but connected processes. In the first, at the level of signification, media texts are composed through signs that acquire their meanings through codes and conventions, structured by the configuration of pre-existing and emergent discourses. In the second, texts are produced in an institutional context in which structures, practices, and ideologies govern the nature of the production process. (p. 75)

This article, therefore, will investigate the NHL Winter Classic from both a consumption-of-text standpoint and a production-of-text standpoint to better understand how the elements of political economy and commodification of nostalgia worked together to create a sporting spectacle. As such, the event serves as an exemplar of the late capitalist spectacularization of sport, with its primacy of the televised image and the "intensive theming and merchandizing . . . that seek to control and direct consumer emotions in a manner that enhances the aura of the sport event, and thereby further stimulates desires for its myriad commodified forms" (Andrews, 2009, pp. 226–227).

Primarily, the consumption theme centers on the emotional appeal of nostalgia, manifested in the game's location, merchandise, and broadcast narrative. The NHL, Reebok, and broadcast partner NBC all emphasized this appeal as a means of extrapolating the maximum potential profits, with the league and the network publicizing the historic and nostalgic features of outdoor hockey in Wrigley Field and Reebok creating a series of pastiche throwback memorabilia for players to wear and fans to purchase.

On the other hand, from the perspective of production, the NHL Winter Classic was governed by political economic principles that are familiar to the world of televised sport. At a basic level, Mosco (1996) applies political economy to media by focusing on "the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (p. 25). By vertically integrating their corporate empires and lobbying for relaxed ownership controls, companies like General Electric, News Corporation, Viacom, Time Warner, and Disney now own a disproportionate amount of media content (Bagdikian, 2004).

As a result, "the media have become increasingly commercialised and thus more reliant on advertising and revenue streams other than public license fees" (Horne, 2006, p. 46). Televised sport fits into this model because

it offers a number of unique qualities: it is relatively inexpensive and easy to produce . . . it has a historically and culturally entrenched popular appeal; and . . . it can boast the rare ability to attract high concentrations of the 18–34 year-old male consumers prized by corporate advertisers. (Slack, 2004, p. 8)

Sport, then, presents an intriguing invitation to broadcasters and advertisers for strictly financial purposes. Critical scholars of sport highlight this important designation. Sage (1990) states, "The media have no inherent interest in sport. It is merely a means for profit making" (p. 123), and Horne (2006) notes, "Commercial sponsors pay money, not for the good of the game, but for the good of their companies' profit. Sponsors (and advertisers) buy audiences, not sports" (p. 47).

The NHL's Winter Classic, therefore, reveals a new understanding that envisions this constructed megaevent as part of a program to lure broadcast-rights contracts and advertisers by delivering the highest ratings possible. Especially considering the minuscule ratings that the first postlockout season delivered, the NHL needed to construct a large-scale event that could rebrand the league as a commercially viable outlet for advertising and sponsorship (Mullman, 2008).

Producing Pregame Nostalgia: The Past Is Coming and It's For Sale!

The 2009 Winter Classic, like most other sports events, was designed as a commodified event. The process of commodification, defined by Sewart (1987), does not deliver "athletic contests which happen to be broadcast on television . . . [but] television events which happen to involve athletes" (p. 178). The commodification process in this instance is unique because the NHL Winter Classic is, unlike the National Football League's Super Bowl, only a regular-season game. It is one single game in a season comprising 1,229 other contests (Kreiser, 2009). Virtually unheard of in other American sports, making a regular-season game a media megaevent distinguished the Winter Classic as an example par excellence of sports commodification. The NHL and NBC transformed an athletic contest into "a commodified spectacle sold in the mass market for mass entertainment . . . [where] the only guiding principle becomes the highest rate of return on one's investment" (Sewart, 1987, p. 182).

One important part of this transformative process involved the NHL and NBC's selling the event and its merchandise. The game and surrounding products were constructed for consumption. As Mosco (1996) states, the commodified event "involves transforming messages, ranging from bits of data to systems of meaningful thought, into marketable products" (p. 146). In this case, the NHL determined that both the game and the products associated with it could be most effectively marketed and sold through the lens of nostalgia.

The concept of nostalgia began in the 17th century with Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, whose intent to classify diseases in Greek resulted in combining the words *nostos* (return) and *algia* (sorrow). As part of a thesis that explained the homesickness of young Swiss soldiers, Hofer believed that nostalgia could be fatal in some cases. Over time, however, the word lost its original vigor as a medical term and has instead become a vaguer, more literary term" (Starobinski & Kemp, 1966).

Recently, nostalgia has been implemented to offset the loss of meaning that is inherent in postmodern thought via the fragmentation of the present (Dickinson, 1997). The loss in meaning confounds contemporary society "because of a separation from an imaginatively remembered past, homeland, family or community" (Tannock, 1995, p. 456). To put it another way, the loss of meaning caused by the introduction into a hyperreal world, a world lacking in authenticity, leads society to question what is real. Baudrillard states that this is when "nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (Storey, 2006, p. 136), producing myths and representations that attempt to put a society at ease. The separation is absolved through a nostalgia that returns society to "lost pasts, places, and peoples" (Tannock, 1995 p. 456), thereby restoring a continuity to our lives that constitutes self-identity.

As Tannock (1995) concludes, "nostalgia works . . . as a periodizing emotion: that was then, and this is now" (p. 456). Nostalgia is no longer the emotional feelings associated with our past but the construction of those past emotions in the present. It is fed by the temporal dualism between past and present that negotiates the existence of an authentic past. Davis (1979) notes, "Nostalgia uses the past. . . it is not the product thereof" (pp. 10–11). There is a significant conflict between nostalgia as past and nostalgia as the construction of the concept of past. For example, Wilson (1999) argues that the concept of nostalgia may be an emotional

longing for a past, but a "longing for a past that did not necessarily exist" (§ 21). Boym's (2001) definition builds on the work of both Davis and Wilson, but with an added nuance to understanding the feelings associated with nostalgia: "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (p. xiii). In other words, given that nostalgia is a construct, it is vulnerable to manipulations, specifically those with commercial purposes. Nostalgia is not the past; it merely uses the past to design for mass consumption in the present. This process has revolutionized the concept of nostalgia, according to Wilson, moving it from a "very private phenomenon centered on one's longing for home, [to what] has become—due in large part no doubt, to commercialization and the realization that nostalgia sells—a very public experience" (§ 9).

The Winter Classic filled a void as a nostalgic sporting event that, though created in the present, attempted to resurrect positive feelings by constructing the past. The game and its products, therefore, were sold via this paradigm. First and foremost, the very idea of playing a professional hockey game outdoors is a nostalgic concept in that it refers to the origins of the game on Canadian ponds. The first evidence of the sport of ice hockey places 19th-century Canadians skating on local ponds, transplanting field hockey to the ice. Consequently, the tradition of playing ice hockey on ponds remains a major part of the sport's history. According to a producer of the 2008 documentary *Pond Hockey*, outdoor hockey represents a place where the game "is played for all the right reasons" (Minnesota Public Radio, 2008). In addition, many youth, both American and Canadian, were introduced to the game on ponds and flooded backyards, including such hockey greats as Wayne Gretzky, Cam Neely, and Neal Broten. Detroit Red Wings Captain Nicklas Lidstrom also seems to be just one of the many NHL players who cherish their memories as a just another kid on the pond: "After school, you would just walk over to the closest outdoor rink and skate with your buddies" ("Outdoor Hockey," 2008, p. C3). The game, as opposed to indoor games, is ludic in nature. Like most childhood games there are (virtually) no rules, no referees, no time clock, and no scoreboards. Unlike other sports, however, hockey maintains a connection to nature that is unique in that is seasonal. Baseball fields and basketball courts are permanent structures, but the black ice of pond hockey is a privilege that only nature can provide. Receiving this privilege, therefore, creates a special sense of feeling for pond hockey; it is a connection that binds the hopefulness of youth with the ludic quality of the sport and Mother Nature. It is a feeling so strong that to transport the pond into Wrigley Field is, in fact, bringing pond hockey back to the masses. This, again, is unique to hockey because no other sport can cross-pollinate venues with such a pure, nostalgic feeling.

To capitalize on the professional outdoor game, the NHL implemented a discourse that legitimated the contest as nostalgic. In this case, NHL executives praised the outdoor event as something both nostalgic and historic. As the league's executive vice president of marketing, Brian Jennings, stated, "It's important to have that casual sports fan tuning [in] and saying, 'Wow, this is really cool (to see) hockey played outdoors like it used to be'" (Mickle, 2008, § 1). NHL Manager of Operations Schuyler Baehman reiterated in a December 2008 interview, "The Winter Classic celebrates what hockey is all about. This event brings us back to the way hockey was born" (McKinna, 2008, § 7). As a result, an outdoor game could resonate with fans who may have participated in pond hockey and refer

to their feelings of childhood fun, playing on the pond with friends. In addition, playing the game outdoors helped the NHL sell the game as an historic event that would appeal to hardcore hockey fans, casual sports fans, and corporate sponsors. For example, NBC Vice President of Strategic Marketing Mike McCarley stated that game advertisements were designed to reach "a broad audience and appeal to that core hockey fan" (Mickle, 2008, ¶ 2). Consider that the NHL titled the game "Classic" in an attempt to portray a history to such a short-lived event but also to saturate the game with a feeling of tradition. According to NHL Chief Operating Officer John Collins, this strategy produced

something that really resonates with people, taking this game—at this level, a regular season game—outdoors. I think we were able to establish a new ritual and tradition among hockey fans and get them to act like hockey fans and celebrate and enjoy the sport. (Lemke, 2009, ¶ 4)

Beyond playing a game outdoors and using the linguistic designation of "Classic," the NHL capitalized on the history of the outdoor venue to further legitimate a nostalgic and historic frame. When Chicago was selected as the host city for the 2009 Winter Classic, NHL organizers debated whether to stage the game in a football stadium (as they did in Buffalo in 2008), namely Chicago's recently renovated Soldier Field (Sassone, 2008). A decision was eventually made to hold the game in venerated Wrigley Field, home of Major League Baseball's Cubs and one of America's oldest baseball stadiums (built in 1914). Although this stadium features a much smaller capacity than cavernous Soldier Field (41,000 compared with 61,000 seats), holding the Classic in the legendary facility increased the historic feel and, consequently, the game's appeal. Baehman called the field "iconic" and revealed that "the opportunity to play the game [in Wrigley] was very appealing. . . . That is sacred sports real estate" (McKinna, 2008, ¶ 20). The NHL's marketing department also labeled Wrigley a "field of dreams" for many of the players and fans involved in attending the game (Wigge, 2008). Advertisements promoting the game and broadcast on a bevy of networks, including NBC, MSNBC, CNBC, USA, SciFi, and the Weather Channel, featured Wrigley Field prominently in an attempt "to dial up this iconic stadium" (Mickle, 2009, ¶ 1).

The NHL's selection of Chicago and Wrigley Field as hosts to the Winter Classic not only took full advantage of the nostalgic potential of Wrigley but also procured a matchup between historic rivals Detroit and Chicago that was certain to draw a large audience. The popularity of the two teams—as well as their large home markets—also ensured that merchandise sales for the game would surpass 2008 Winter Classic levels. Adding to the novelty of the game, as well as cashing in on elements of nostalgia, the NHL paired with official apparel sponsor Reebok to provide historically inspired jerseys for both teams designed specifically for the Winter Classic event. A report on the 2009 season showed that the top-selling jerseys in the league were retro styled (Fish, 2009). In fact, retro jerseys are so popular that one NHL team—the Edmonton Oilers—is permanently switching back to a 1980s design for the 2009–10 season (Matheson, 2009). For the Winter Classic, therefore, retro jerseys, almost certain to boost merchandise sales, were a necessity. The Red Wings dressed in a jersey inspired by uniforms from the 1926–27 Detroit Cougars, and the Blackhawks' jersey was a combination of jerseys worn in the 1936–37 and 1937–38 seasons. The notion that these jerseys were somehow historic reflects the

understanding of nostalgia as something that harkens to the past but is constructed in the present. As DaSilva and Faught (1982) note, "objects of nostalgia . . . are now used to fictionalize past and present experience" (p. 48). In this instance, the Blackhawks' jersey is a completely modern fabrication that bears no connection to the past while hiding the political economic conditions of the present. It is only important that the jerseys appear to be from the past, considering they are produced by Reebok under the most modern of technologies and economic conditions.

In 2004, Boston-based Reebok acquired Canadian NHL jersey manufacturer The Hockey Company and signed a deal with the league to outfit all 30 NHL teams (Gatlin, 2004). Just 2 years later, Reebok became one of sportswear giant Adidas-Salomon's 80 subsidiaries controlled from its headquarters in Germany (Dougherty, 2005). As a central tenet of political economy, when firms consolidate and become even bigger firms, they profit via policies that deregulate production, privatize markets, and institute free trade (Harvey, 2005). This creates monopolies that grant an inordinate amount of power to a small number of large firms that can export jobs and factories to low-wage countries because they operate free from governmental control.

According to the workers' rights group UNITE HERE Canada, most NHL jerseys produced by Reebok are actually manufactured in Indonesia for an estimated cost of \$8.19 ("How Much," 2009). Meanwhile, the selling price for these jerseys is listed at \$114.99, although Winter Classic jerseys at the NHL's online store were listed at \$149.99. The NHL and Reebok also provided more than just retro jerseys for the 2009 Winter Classic. According to the *Sports Business Journal*, "the size of Winter Classic merchandise selection, much of it from Reebok, has doubled this year, and includes outerwear, fleece, caps, gloves, and scarves" (Lefton, 2008, ¶ 3). Many of these goods, up to two thirds according to UNITE HERE Canada, come from factories in China.

The commodification of the Winter Classic, therefore, did more than just sell a spectacle that happened to feature an athletic contest. By focusing on the most efficient way to sell a product, the NHL and its partners exploited nostalgia and memories of childhood to provide a myriad of products for consumption. It is a process that not only reduces the ludic nature of sport but also further alienates consumers from the products that purportedly deliver a sense of communal identity.

Coming to You Live From Your Childhood! Nostalgia in the Text

Nostalgia permeated NBC's broadcast of the 2009 Winter Classic through a variety of production elements, announcer comments, and guest interviews. Because of its significant popularity and mystique (Swyers, 2005, 2010), Wrigley Field became a primary narrative for NBC throughout the game. Visually, it was a dominant feature. The opening of the Winter Classic telecast began with a sweeping overhead shot of Wrigley Field from the sky above, a shot that was repeated nearly two dozen times throughout the broadcast. Wrigley's history and tradition were certainly on display. Examples of the strictly visual attempts to make the Winter Classic seem a part of Wrigley abounded: The Winter Classic logo was displayed among the ivy of Wrigley's outfield walls and on home plate. In addition, the outer façade of

the transported rink was made of brick to emulate Wrigley's own unique design elements. Finally, NBC was able to take advantage of Wrigley Field's personality by implementing the famous hand-operated centerfield scoreboard, broadcasting the changing of numbers after goals were scored.

The first spoken text of the telecast, delivered by host Bob Costas, welcomed viewers to the "storied venue," and, naturally, throughout the broadcast both players and announcers made constant reference to the historicity of the venue. NBC attempted to establish the Wrigley setting in several pregame montages that relied heavily on historic images and voices, connecting the history of Wrigley to the Winter Classic. One such montage, dubbed "Newsreel: Historic Wrigley Field," featured black and white images of the stadium mixed with footage of (Chicago Bear) Gale Sayers avoiding tacklers in 1965, (Chicago Cub) Ernie Banks hitting his 500th homerun in 1970, (Chicago Bear Head Coach) George Halas winning the NFL championship in 1963, and Ken Holtzman pitching a no-hitter for the Cubs in 1969. The montage then immediately cut to color, reestablished the present, and delivered an edited sequence of ice skates being sharpened and players warming up, dressing for the game, and taping their equipment. Those images were followed by a collage of historical Wrigley Field moments (Harry Caray singing during the seventh-inning stretch, the first night game at the stadium, the Cubs celebrating a division championship on the field). As Costas reappeared live, he proudly declared, "and now hockey at Wrigley Field," equating the game with a long line of memorable historical events.

The emotional and historical montages would continue; just before the game started, NBC showed clips of the stadium in another newsreel-like black and white montage, complete with audio clips of an old radio play-by-play broadcast. The montage slowly transitioned into a color slideshow that began with a colored image of the ivy on Wrigley's outfield walls and chronicled a series of historic events (with famous radio calls, again, in the background). The accompanying voiceover to this opening video again emphasized Wrigley's history:

This field, where the ivy grows, is home to legends. Where heroes are extraordinary and ordinary at the same time; where mortals have become immortalized. Today, one more chapter will be added. Here, at the friendly confines of Wrigley Field. Two iconic franchises meet, for the first time, outdoors in the Windy City. (Flood, 2009)

Using a bag of emotional video-production parlor tricks, the broadcast of this game at Wrigley Field connected the stadium's historic mystique to the Winter Classic game, delivering memories before the game and insinuating the memory making that was to come.

Apart from the focus on the stadium, the nostalgic pond-hockey sentiment was another dominant storyline echoed by players and NBC commentators throughout the game. When interviewed during the pregame or before periods, players from both teams referred to their beginnings in the sport on ponds. One player specifically, Chicago captain Jonathan Toews, whose pond-hockey home video made it into the hands of NBC and onto its telecast, was asked about how Wrigley's outdoor rink compared with those his father built for him as a child: "It obviously compares to where I grew up playing hockey, so it's pretty special right now." After the first intermission, Chicago forward Kris Versteeg was asked about the game thus far

and responded to a question about the style of play, "I guess we're going back to childhood days, getting a little rough on the pond with your buddies." Detroit assistant captain Kris Draper also noted during an intermission that by "playing outdoors, you're bringing back so many memories as a kid."

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that during both the 2008 and 2009 Winter Classics, the NHL set up a game of pond hockey on the fields next to the professional rink. In Buffalo, the "pond" was placed in the end zone of the stadium, and at Wrigley, the pond was located in center field. A significant marker, the pond-hockey game was set up for children to play during the pregame and intermissions between periods, as a way to make the connection between ponds and professionals all the more apparent. The first shot of Costas in the telecast placed him right in front of this pond, where excited youngsters skated up and down, emulating the professional players warming up on the other ice surface a few feet away.

NBC further pushed the issue with a feature story during the second intermission focused specifically on pond hockey. Finally, the point was hammered home by announcer Eddie Olczyk in his final remarks before the broadcast went off air: "This is what it's all about, taking the game back to its grassroots." All of these elements, combined with the buildup of nostalgia before the game, had just one purpose: to increase attendance, viewership, and merchandise sales. Ultimately, however, attendance figures and television ratings are part of the familiar story of broadcasting sport in that they are only the means to an end: the financial viability of the Winter Classic via advertising and broadcast-rights contracts.

These Nostalgic Happy Feelings Are Brought to You by . . . Advertising

A significant part of selling an event and creating a media megaevent is generating heavy amounts of advertising for the audiences that the event attracts. Advertising is a central element of the political economy of media, in that the large media companies are keen to draw large audiences for the sole purpose of selling to them. Audiences and advertising consequently go hand in hand. Mosco (1996) states that "mass media programming is used to construct audiences; advertisers pay media companies for access to these audiences; audiences are thereby delivered to advertisers" (p. 148). Modeled on Mosco's idea, Horne, Tomlinson, and Whannel (1999) position sport as another means of producing audiences for advertisers, because "the real product of sport is the television audience, which is produced by televised sport performance" (p. 276). With such a potential for financial windfall, large media companies, Andrews (2006) notes, have gotten involved in broadcasting sports events:

Media giants such as Disney, General Electric, News Corporation, and Viacom routinely insert sporting spectacles into their program schedules, which allows them to benefit from, and indeed cultivate, sport's established popularity through increased viewership and advertising revenue. (p. 26)

This notion is echoed by McChesney (2008), who posits that televised sports, in particular special events, are driven by the "insatiable hunger for these advertising dollars" (p. 230). In sum, political economy asserts that the media megaevent is produced because it can draw audiences attractive to advertisers. Specifically,

sports audiences represent the highly coveted male 18- to 34-year-old demographic, considered highly valuable and increasingly difficult to obtain via other television genres (Semuels, 2008).

The NHL quite transparently promoted this aspect of the Winter Classic in press releases building up to the January game. One such release featured the following quote from NHL Senior Vice President of Corporate Sales and Marketing Keith Wachtel: "The NHL Winter Classic has become a signature event for the League, creating a major marketing platform for our partners to activate while placing the NHL in a leadership position for sporting events on New Year's Day" ("NHL Winter Classic," 2008, ¶ 7). Ideally, the NHL would like the Winter Classic to imitate the tremendous advertising success of the National Football League's Super Bowl. That event consistently provides advertisers with audiences upward of 90 million Americans (Johnson, 2009). The audience size for the Super Bowl therefore justifies the millions of dollars spent by corporations for seconds of airtime; in 2009, a down year for many businesses, NBC's price for 30 seconds of airtime was \$3 million (Petrecca & Howard, 2009).

Realizing its unique ability to draw a heavily sought demographic, the NHL offered advertisers the opportunity to get involved in the sport's biggest event. For example, no other NHL game in the past 2 years has ever contracted a title sponsor. With Bridgestone tires in 2009, the NHL added the sponsor to the title of the game, as in, "The Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic." This title was prominently featured throughout the broadcast by commentators, in the media, and on the NHL's Winter Classic-dedicated Web page. In addition, the Bridgestone logo was part of the on-ice signage located in the middle of the rink and on the rink's side boards. For Bridgestone, sponsorship of the Winter Classic became part of a multiyear deal signed between the league and the tire company in 2008 (Greenberg, 2008). Rumored to be in the eight-figure range, the deal promotes Bridgestone as one of the primary sponsors of the NHL, with rights to promotional opportunities at a number of league events and access to NHL players for advertisements and sponsored appearances.

Clearly, Bridgestone's interest is, as Sage (1990) notes, not in the sport but in reaching NHL fans, proven to be the most technologically savvy and affluent sports fans in America (Greenberg, 2008; Markus, 2004). The NHL has used this specific demographic element to lure advertisers eager to make a mark with technology and social media. According to Larry Gelfand, the NHL's senior vice president of media sales, the league has "leverag[ed] the technical sophistication of our fan base and deliver[ed] a marketing solution that enables our partners to reach this very appealing demographic" ("NHL Network Online," 2008, ¶ 5). The NHL also touts professional sport's most loyal and affluent fan base, with more fans likely to buy from official sponsors and more fans in households that make over \$100,000 than any other American sports league (St. Louis Blues, 2008). Consequently, the NHL sees its fans as "the most appealing demographic for a marketer; they're younger, more educated, more affluent and more tech savvy than any other sports fans" (Rover & DiLorenzo, 2010). This information has been expeditiously put into practice. A December 2008 press release from the NHL and Bridgestone quoted Bridgestone President of Consumer Replacement Tire Sales John Baratta calling the Winter Classic

the perfect opportunity for Bridgestone brand exposure throughout America and beyond. This visibility continues to build upon our strong relationship

with the NHL and is a great way to begin the New Year by reaching out to the affluent and loyal NHL fan. ("NHL Winter Classic," 2008, ¶ 4)

A day later, a second press release via the NHL and Bridgestone again touted the game as an opportunity to prominently position the Bridgestone brand. In the words of Bridgestone's Phil Pasci, a vice president of marketing, "This game promises to be a sellout and attract a large and loyal television audience. This is a tremendous opportunity to build Bridgestone brand awareness" ("NHL Winter Classic," 2008, ¶ 7).

In regard to other commercial sponsors, Wrigley Field and the area around the stadium were filled with signage, from the traditional billboards around the field to banners on Wrigley Field's outfield walls to the advertising-plastered "Spectator Plaza" outside the stadium. A short list of sponsors involved included Verizon, Honda, XM satellite radio, Bud Light, EA Sports, McDonald's, Reebok, and Cisco (sponsor of the Winter Classic's pregame show). Specifically, stipulations of the NHL's deal with McDonald's ensured that the restaurant would get "exclusive branding behind the player benches and penalty boxes in the NBC telecast" ("McDonalds Extends NHL," December 2008).

These examples display the 2009 Winter Classic's potential to serve as a vehicle for a wave of potential advertising opportunities. As a result, the Classic has invigorated the corporate community. According to NHL Chief Operating Officer John Collins, a former NFL executive, the 2009 Winter Classic felt "like one of those events [Super Bowl and Pro Bowl]. The hype, the coverage, the interest—and not just on the media or fan base, but also within the corporate marketplace. It feels at that level" ("Buzz Seems" 2008, ¶ 4).

Another company that took full advantage of the opportunity presented by the Winter Classic was official NHL clothing supplier Reebok. In addition to opening two stores in the Wrigley area specifically to sell Winter Classic merchandise, Reebok launched an innovative in-game contest. A promotion dubbed "The Reebok Lost Logo Challenge" asked TV viewers and fans in attendance to spot the one player on the ice without a Reebok logo on his jersey (the Reebok logo is featured on the center of the player's back, just below the collar and just above the player's name). Viewers on television were reminded of the contest several times during the broadcast, with accompanying shots that showed players with the logo conspicuously displayed. Meanwhile, fans in attendance at Wrigley were given Winter Classic and Reebok-branded binoculars to survey the players (these fans were instructed to text message their answer to Reebok). The contest drew additional attention to the retro jerseys that debuted at the Classic but also focused on Reebok's official sponsorship of NHL jerseys. Reebok Marketing Director John McMahon stated that "it was a great way to cement our message of authenticity. Hopefully, what this promotion does is turn the light bulb on with consumers that Reebok is the brand on the field of play" (Lefton, 2008, ¶ 4).

In sum, by lifting a regular-season game into the realm of the commodified sport spectacle, in an effort to attract higher audiences and, thus, advertising revenues, the NHL successfully injected a high concentration of sponsorship into the Winter Classic. Paired with the elements of nostalgia detailed herein, corporations had ample opportunity to capitalize on the NHL's young, affluent, educated, tech-savvy, and, thus, highly valuable audience demographic.

Broadcast Rights: How Sports Leagues Make the Big Money

Mosco's (1996) thesis that programming is designed to construct audiences for the purpose of delivering them to advertisers speaks to the primary purpose of megaevent sports programming; a closely connected effect of this process involves the sums media companies pay leagues for broadcasting rights. In other words, the only reason media companies are willing to pay these occasionally outrageous fees is that they are aware that broadcasting NFL, NHL, Major League Baseball, or National Basketball Association games will provide a healthy return on their investment from advertising revenue. The relationship is perhaps best explained by Andrews (2006), who states, "The clamor for audience ratings has led to network television moguls' perpetual engagement in a circus of spiraling bidding wars for the exclusive rights to these events" (as cited in Maxwell, 2001, p. 37).

Because the sums of money involved in selling broadcast rights typically figure in the hundreds of millions of dollars, these contracts have become the lifeblood of sports leagues around the globe. McChesney (2008) notes that "the importance of TV has never been greater for sport. By the 1970s, it had become axiomatic that successful management of professional sports leagues and franchises is based on the capacity to best exploit rights payments" (p. 230). In many instances, leagues are so desperate for these contracts that they will alter their sport to more seamlessly integrate it into the medium of television. The NHL is no stranger to this practice; its broadcast-contract history is one of the primary factors in the production of the Winter Classic. Specifically, the NHL created the Winter Classic to raise hockey's profile for the primary purpose of creating a bidding war for a new broadcasting contract.

Beginning with the 1998–99 NHL season, the broadcast contract with ESPN/ABC paid the league \$120 million per season through the 2003–04 season, for a total of \$600 million (Sandomir, 1998). This contract represented a 140% increase from the league's previous contracts with Fox and ESPN (Martzke, 2003). Before the scheduled beginning of the 2004–05 season, ESPN renewed the cable portion of the contract for 1 year at \$60 million, but ABC did not return as the national network sponsor. With ratings having steadily declined over the preceding decade, the NHL struggled to find a network willing to pay for broadcasting rights. Thus, instead of receiving millions in guaranteed money like the other major professional sports leagues, the NHL was forced to sign a 2-year revenue-sharing deal with NBC that would split revenues (after production costs), with 80% headed to the NHL and the remaining 20% to NBC. Indicative of the stature of NHL, revenue-sharing-only broadcast contracts are virtually unheard of in major sports television broadcasting. By accepting the deal, the NHL joined the likes of the Arena Football League and National Indoor Lacrosse League as leagues with revenue-sharing contracts ("NHL Signs," 2004).

Then the NHL's 2004–05 season was cancelled, marking the first time in North American professional sports history that a league lost an entire season because of a labor dispute ("NHL Cancel," 2005). The news was, for many fans and players, shocking ("Lockout," 2005). The resulting publicity found many commentators, analysts, and even hockey great Wayne Gretzky questioning whether the 2005–06 season would commence in September as scheduled. When news of the 2004–05

season cancellation was announced in February of 2005, Gretzky bemoaned that there was no potential end in sight: "I don't feel there will be a lot of negotiating before next September. . . . I hope they are negotiating but my gut instinct is this could be on the shelf for a while" ("NHL Season," 2005, ¶ 25).

Yet on July 22, 2005, the NHL owners and players struck a deal that ensured that the 2005–06 season would go on as scheduled. ESPN's broadcast relationship with the NHL, however, would not. The preeminent cable sports network declined to renew their broadcast-contract options with the league after failing to match the 2-year offer of Comcast-owned Outdoor Life Network (OLN; later renamed Versus) that would pay the NHL \$65 and \$70 million, respectively, for the 2005–06 and 2006–07 seasons. Reacting to the failed negotiations, ESPN president George Bodenheimer released a statement that read, "Given the prolonged work stoppage and the league's TV ratings history, no financial model even remotely supports the contract terms [the NHL] offered. We wish the NHL all the best" ("NHL Strikes," 2005, ¶ 11). Considering the limited household reach of OLN (63.7 million subscribers) compared with ESPN (90 million subscribers), many again feared that the NHL would slide farther into obscurity (Buteau & Kreda, 2005).

To offset these fears, the NHL was forced to reinvigorate its product to "win renewed attention from fans and television networks" (Lapointe, 2005, p. 7). The first means of accomplishing this task was to change the game's rules to encourage more goal scoring. Traditionally, the more goals scored in a game, the more exciting and entertaining it is. Thus, increasing the likelihood of goals met the criteria for increasing the entertainment of the NHL game, a critical factor because "contemporary sport . . . must ensure that customers are (and remain) entertained" (Crawford, 2004, p. 82). These rule changes, which included abolishing ties and ending games with fan-friendly shoot-outs, are an example of "sport's integrity . . . corrupted by transformation into commodified, television-focused entertainment" (Giulianotti, 2005, p. 40).

As fans steadily returned to NHL arenas, television ratings continued to languish. Reports after the first season of play after the lockout showed that ratings on both NBC and OLN were down significantly from prelockout levels (Thomaselli, 2006). The changes to the rules had brought hardcore hockey fans back into the fold, but the NHL and its broadcast partners still wanted to bolster more casual-fan interest in the game. The NHL and NBC therefore announced on September 18, 2007, that they would stage an outdoor game in Buffalo, NY, on January 1, 2008. Not only would the game take place before a huge live audience, but with NBC broadcasting the game nationally, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman stated, "This game provides a wonderful opportunity to showcase our great players, honor hockey's heritage and ring in the New Year with the best fans in sports" ("Pens, Sabres" 2007, p. C2). By featuring the Winter Classic on January 1, a traditionally rich day for sports, NHL executive John Collins affirmed hockey's place on the national stage: "We should stand tall on a day like Jan. 1 and put a claim on it" (Sandomir, 2008a, p. 5). The outdoor game, NHL officials believed, "publicizes our sport. . . . It introduces people who normally don't watch hockey to the game. We know we have a hard-core hockey group, but we need to break out" (Houston, 2008, p. S1).

The 2008 Winter Classic was an unprecedented ratings success for the NHL and NBC. The telecast earned a 2.6 overnight rating, the highest number for NHL

hockey on television in almost 12 years (Kissell, 2008). To put it further into perspective, late-season telecasts on NBC from the previous season averaged a 1.0 rating. As a result of this success, the NHL and NBC decided to continue the classic in Chicago in 2009, primarily, Collins stated, "as our corporate and business partners as well as sponsors and licensees throughout the U.S. and Canada really liked the concept" (Pursell, 2008, p. 6). More important, the success of the event strengthened the NHL's broadcast relationships with Versus and NBC. Less than 3 weeks after the 2008 Winter Classic, Versus re-signed with the NHL for 3 more years at inflationary increases. The deal is expected to be in the range of \$72.5 million per season (Sandomir, 2008b). As for NBC, the success of the Winter Classic encouraged them to extend their agreement with the NHL for another year, albeit at the same revenue-sharing level of their initial contract that began in 2005.

Although the first Classic was the first step toward using a nostalgic event to rebuild the image of the NHL to casual fans, the second version capitalized on the history of Wrigley Field and the teams and cities involved to produce an even bigger commodified nostalgic spectacle. The 2009 Winter Classic, although played in a much smaller stadium, took place in a far larger market and implemented more commercial sponsorship than the previous year (Sandomir, 2008c). Furthermore, in the buildup to the game, NBC maintained that if the game could build on the ratings success of the previous Classic, it would be "another sign of its recovery from the lockout that cancelled the 2004–05 season, and as proof that it can compete nationally for attention as well as regionally" (Skolnick, 2008). Cementing the recovery effort, the 2009 Winter Classic drew a 2.9 overnight rating, a 12% increase over the previous year ("Winter Classic," 2009). With approximately 4.4 million viewers tuned in to watch the game, the 2009 Winter Classic became the most-watched NHL regular-season game in 34 years (Mickle, 2009).

Boosted by the 2009 Winter Classic, ratings for both Versus and NBC have steadily risen compared with 2008 levels (Houston, 2009). Considering the low ratings that the NHL was getting in the years before the Winter Classic, the success of the game has solidified hockey's presence on television. Not only is this critical for the league, which needs national and cable television outlets to push the sport into the American consciousness, but also it is absolutely vital for negotiating broadcasting-rights contracts. Considering that the NHL struggled to place its product with a national broadcaster, the league's goal to ensure its national television perpetuity is represented by its desire to extend the NBC revenue-sharing contract for the 2009–10 season (Mickle & Ourand, 2009). If, however, the league continues to increase its ratings, it should be expected that a new rights contract beginning in 2011 could include a requirement for guaranteed money. With both ESPN and Fox rumored to be joining the bidding process with current carrier Versus, the rights contract for the 2011–12 NHL season will be the league's largest postlockout deal (Klein, 2010). It may not reach the ESPN/ABC deal that set a benchmark for the league during the late 1990s, but with time, the NHL is positioning itself to once again cash in on its product—with the highly attractive Winter Classic as a centerpiece. With frequent comparisons to the Super Bowl, it appears that the NHL wants the same broadcast bidding wars that have driven rights contracts for megaevents like the Olympics, Major League Baseball's World Series, and the NCAA Bowl Championship Series into the stratosphere.

Conclusion

In sum, the 2009 Winter Classic, as a constructed sports spectacle, must be considered an economically determined event that created meaning exploited for commercial gain. The admission on behalf of the NHL and its partner companies that they explicitly commodified every element of the Winter Classic is a perfect example of how neoliberal capitalism is not only accepted by audiences, but completely unchallenged. "Commodification is perceived not as a process of power but as the natural order, common-sense, taken-for-granted, reality of social life" (Mosco, 1996, p. 154).

Furthermore, the commercialization of the Winter Classic, though overwhelming in the context of this article, does not provoke outrage but is instead celebrated by fans so focused on the spectacle that the commodification surrounding the game has become normalized via the ideological acceptance of capitalism and commodification in sport; *The New York Times* credits the Classic's popularity with fans to the "atmosphere, the pageantry, and the rapport. . . . It's a big party" (Hackel, 2009, ¶ 20), and the *Chicago Tribune* called it "the biggest party in [Black] hawks history" (Sullivan, 2009, ¶ 18). Considering the popularity of the game, as well as the competition between potential city hosts, the NHL has built a product that has, thus far, not been penetrated by an economic critique. This analysis has showed how the game, far from a celebration of hockey's roots, used the nostalgia of outdoor hockey to sell, market, and profit from a regular-season professional hockey game. Unlike the exhibitions that take place in most sports leagues, like All-Star games, which are endlessly commercialized, the NHL Winter Classic is a regular-season game that counts in the standings. Compared with the spectacle of the Super Bowl, however, the relative importance of the Winter Classic is minimal. Whereas the Super Bowl determines the champion of the National Football League, the reward for the winner of the Winter Classic is just another win in the regular-season record books.

The fact that the NHL has built up the Winter Classic to feel like more than just a regular game, however, is a testament to the strength of their marketing and promotional techniques. This game is truly unique and special, as the NHL proclaims, but in part because of elements somewhat out of the league's control. First, the concept of nostalgic presentation cannot be replicated in the same way by any other sports league. Second, not only is the nostalgia difficult to replicate for other sports leagues, it is difficult to envision the National Basketball Association returning to the Springfield YMCA to stage a regular-season game. The NHL, however, has the unique ability to host a game in a stadium designed for another sport.

The end result is a unique event, predicated on nostalgic elements, that aligns well with a host of economic variables. The game, played in an outdoor stadium, can draw more fans. With both teams debuting retro sports gear, merchandise sales (and profits) can skyrocket. Given a prime broadcasting spot, and in conjunction with the large audience that New Year's Day draws, there are nearly unlimited opportunities for advertising in a variety of innovative formats. Finally, by drawing a large audience and a bevy of advertisers even just for this one game, the NHL positions its product for an increased payout in its television contract.

The NHL has come a long way since the lockout of 2004–05 ended. The pinnacle of the sport's return has, thus far, been epitomized by the rise of the Winter

Classic. Merely a unique blip on the sports radar in 2008, the 2009 version combined a number of elements to escalate the game's profile: staging the game in historic Wrigley Field, inviting two franchises with dedicated fan bases, producing twice as much merchandise designed for that game only, and granting a wealth of opportunities to advertisers to get involved. It is a process that was repeated in 2010, as the NHL again mined society's nostalgic sentiment by bringing the Winter Classic to Boston's historic Fenway Park (Fee & Raposa, 2009). Much like the celebration that occurred in Wrigley Field, the 2010 Fenway version was embraced with enthusiasm and excitement by a passionate local fan base, dressed in Reebok's retro-inspired Winter Classic jerseys and apparel. As for future Winter Classics, sport fans can expect more of the same. The 2011 game was been played in Pittsburgh's Heinz Field, pitting the league's two biggest superstars, Sidney Crosby and Alexander Ovechkin, against each other. With TV-contract renewals planned for the end of 2011, the NHL and its corporate sponsors will be there too, unchecked by consumers, spurred by the potential for huge profits, and ready to turn the sport's most important event into an even bigger commodified nostalgic sport spectacle.

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