

On Hockey by Jack Burnham

I can recall my first Saturday Night on Canada better than my first Thursday and far better than my first Wednesday or Sunday. In the fall, I could remember Monday, Thursday, and Sunday and in the summer, every weekday seemed up for grabs, but for the first days of winter, once all the leaves have disappeared, I only remembered Saturdays. Only Saturday nights, at that. Saturday nights are when the stories began.

Canada is a land of mythos. It is a necessity, a demand of its human geography. A country so vast cannot be held together by anything else. Even the railroad became larger than life, pictured on the purple dollar bill as cutting across vast mountain passes and hurtling through a blinding, snowy wilderness. The same can be said for the *coureur de bois*, the woodsmen that traveled across a continent to find furs and paddled into the popular consciousness of French Canada. Only stories can spark a light in the wilderness, the same way that the CBC has been broadcasting for generations and *The Young and the Restless* has never missed a season. Huddled around televisions, a crude approximation for a fireside, Canadians knitted together their own story. Without stories about who Canadians want to be, they would likely have become North Minnesotans. Perhaps a bit of Clintonian folksiness, to be sure, but yet, its essence remains. Home himself could never have envisioned such an audience.

All myths require a generative property, a reason to believe. They require a hero and a villain; drama between the forces of good and evil; and a transformative journey which connects to the transformation of the audience. Myths stay because they are epics and we are so small. Set adrift on stormy seas, myths offer us a guide through the waves, bringing great powers to heel and to heal. The myths of old included us in them, with our desires and our flaws fully on display. Revenge, wrath, jealous, hatred, love, fate. Myths offered a performance of ourselves as we imagined us to be as even with limitless powers, our heroes remained deeply human. Above all, however, was the story of the single combat warriors, facing off against impermeable odds. A distillation of all that is righteous and Good, facing off against the enemy, a battle upon whose outcome rested the fate of the world. Winner advances, loser goes home to a golf course in the sky. A Game Seven brought to its logical extreme.

I never played hockey as a child, nor found much interest in it until I came to university. I enjoyed sports as a pastime, but not nearly as much as a spectator. We never had television so I hardly watched any sports that I could not attend in person. During the winters, I would watch Dartmouth College basketball and hockey and, in the fall, soccer and football. On my desk while I write, I keep one of the pucks that was flipped over the glass. It reminds me now of the chill of the arena and the taste of stale popcorn and knocking on the end boards. Those teams of my childhood were champions and a few would play professionally, but I hardly noticed. Lord Stanley was not going to visit such a place.

Attending school in Canada was a decision that came about as naturally as learning to fly by whirling one's arms around in a vaguely circular fashion and hoping for a breeze. Adding seven hours between myself and the Green Mountains was inevitable in that no one stays in Vermont for long, but nonetheless jarring having never heard of the GTA or anywhere else in Ontario besides Ottawa. I was merely proud that I knew the capitol was not Toronto, as so many of my classmates had erroneously told me before I chose to attend. All of Kingston appeared as a

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city out of a Dickens novel, complete with the cobblestone streets and a wide market square. Seeing the sign promising refuge to the “Loyalists” only showed me that I was out of my element. Clearly, I needed to find a way to fit in. A reason to believe. I needed to understand the stories around me. So, I followed the stereotype, itself a myth designed to appeal to the masses. I turned on the hockey game.

Unadulterated joy. Every holiday placed end to end to manufacture four hundred and twenty minutes of perfection. All of the storylines, the joy, the pain, the demons, pushed together behind the glass for the entire world to witness. Basketball can only lay claim to a month of national enjoyment along with the cursing of vague probabilities. Even football only matters on one winter night of the year and watching Tom Brady sling his way to glory got old after the first three times. Playoff hockey is where hype fades and myths are cemented forever, stamped into stainless steel. Watching Mitch Marner, still a child, willingly absorb four shots of vulcanized rubber to the chest, was the ultimate expression of a single combat warrior. Sitting in my room, high above the busy street, I watched stories of old unfold night after night. But I knew that not so far away, millions watched the same. A consolation for a loss.

I’ve often reflected on how those college players must have viewed children such as myself, now being a student. When I attend a game now, I still see them, woolen toques and all, looking for a souvenir. Perhaps on a desk, not far into the future, there will be a battered disc with another jersey beside it. And the blue light will glow from their living rooms and on the screen, a goaltender will be stretched out, reaching with gloved hand, turning away a shot. Just the same as the fire and the long shadows and another story, whispering out of the past.