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Games

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Hockey Sticks and Heartstrings: The Men's Gold Medal Hockey Game and the Affective Legacy of the 2010 Olympic Games

by Kelsey Blair

When Sidney Crosby scored the game-winning goal for Canada in the gold medal men's hockey match at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, the audience—both inside the stadium and the streets of downtown Vancouver—went wild. The atmosphere was described by media outlets as “electric” and “joyous.”¹ Is there a more precise way to define the feelings that circulated during and after the game? Mega-event legacy evaluation has predominantly emphasized tangible impacts such as infrastructure development, tourism, and employment. Here, I examine one of the intangible impacts of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games: its affective legacy. I analyze how the gold medal men's hockey game was positioned to become a defining moment of the Olympics. Drawing on the work of Jill Dolan, I argue that a combination of ideal conditions and careful orchestrations resulted in what Dolan calls a “utopian performative,” a feeling of fleeting, but intense inter-subjectivity experienced during a performance. As a result, the men's gold medal match became an important temporal, cultural, and affective reference point for Vancouverites.

Affect, Hockey, and the Olympics' Performance Frame

There is no single theory of affect; however, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth argue, affect's various theoretical articulations are connected by a renewed emphasis on bodily experience and attention to “intensities that pass body to body” (1). In other words, affect gives us the tools to query the generation and circulation of

feeling. I am particularly interested in paying attention to what Erin Hurley terms “feeling-technologies,” the mechanisms that “do something” with feeling and manage spectators' experiences (29). As I will demonstrate, the sensations that circulated during and after the men's gold medal hockey game may have been experienced by audience members spontaneously, but they were the result of a combination of ideal conditions—unpredictable factors that could be anticipated but not controlled by organizers—and careful orchestrations.

The plotting of sporting events within a performance frame functions as a feeling-technology that manages spectators' experiences. Sporting mega-events such as the Olympics or the World Cup employ portable, and often strictly regulated, performance frames: the Games begin with an opening ceremony, discrete sporting events take place according to a set schedule, and the Games conclude with a closing ceremony. This performance frame ensures the event's reproducibility and continuity over time and space, and while a host city might inflect a mega-event with certain national or local flavour, the frame remains unchanged. The gold medal hockey game is usually scheduled as the final sporting event of the Winter Olympics. With progressively heightening stakes, a sporting competition's final match is likely to be an affective climax, charged with intensity. According to the logic of sport competitions, then, the game is positioned as the affective climax of the Winter Olympics.



Canadian fans at the 2010 Olympic gold medal men's hockey game.
Photo by S. Yume, CC-BY 2.0, [flickr.com/photos/syume/4399693897](https://www.flickr.com/photos/syume/4399693897)

The feeling-technology of the performance frame was amplified by the ideal condition of hockey's position in Canada's cultural imaginary, a position marked by both inclusion and exclusion. As Richard Gruneau and David Whitson (pace Clifford Geertz) suggest, "The game [of hockey] has become one of this country's most significant collective representations—a story that Canadians tell themselves about what it means to be Canadian" (13). This story includes several intersecting narratives from pick-up hockey games on frozen lakes to the style of play and success of the men's national team. Even I, who never quite managed to learn to skate, feel connected to this narrative: my grandmother met my grandfather when she body checked him into a bank of snow during a pick-up hockey game (or so the story goes). Of course, the "story of what it means to be Canadian" according to hockey is fraught with problems and contradictions. As women, hockey does not hail either me or my grandmother the same way it does the men in my family. As Michael Robidoux suggests, "The physically dominant, heterosexist, and capitalist associations of this specific identity are certainly exclusionary" (222). Frequently employed in nation-building to help Canada define itself in contrast to other nations, exclusion is central to Canada's hockey story. As a result, international hockey games hosted in Canada are always charged with a range of affective attachments, from pride and excitement to bewilderment and frustration, particularly for those excluded

by hockey's hail. Significantly, these affectively charged games secure their legacy by contributing to one of Canada's most significant collective representations. Canada won the Canada Cup in Calgary in 1984 and the World Junior Championships in Hamilton in 2009. Vancouver 2010 was positioned as the next major landmark in Canada's hockey story.

Performance Studies and the Mega-Event Narrative

In their article "How to Influence National Pride? The Olympic Medal Index as a Unifying Narrative," Ivo van Hilvoorde, Agnes Elling, and Ruud Stokvis argue that the medal index provides an overarching narrative for the mega-event as a whole while also allowing nations to identify where they stand in relation to one another. Canada's Own the Podium program was one such effort designed to influence Canada's medal index narrative. Own the Podium was a collaborative plan between government, corporate, sport, and private sponsors to increase Canadian athlete success at the Games. One of the program's goals was to place number one in the overall medal index at the Olympics. However, as van Hilvoorde, Elling, and Stokvis argue, medal index narratives can become narratives of expectancy that "develop into a mirror of national identity. This is what we, as a nation, are worth. This is what we should win; otherwise, we fail" (van Hilvoorde, Elling,

and Stokvis 94). By midway through the Olympics, Own the Podium had a problem: it was impossible for Canada to finish first in the total medal count, and commentators began to decry the program's failure.²

Due to a flurry of Canadian medal wins in the Olympics' second week, Own the Podium was able to refocus the medal index narrative to the number of gold medals won. On 27 February 2010, Canada was awarded its eleventh Gold medal, setting the record for the most number of gold medals won by a host country. By the time the puck dropped for the men's hockey match, Canada was guaranteed to finish first in the gold medal index. Cam Cole of *The National Post* captures the effects of this narrative. He writes, "The medals came in an amazing rush in the second week, built to a crescendo on the weekend and spilled over in a moment of unbearable sweetness at the very end" ("High and Mighty"). It is no surprise that Cole uses "crescendo" and "sweetness," words that appeal to sensation rather than intellect to describe the results of the medal index narrative. After all, medal index narratives turn on quantifying success in order to generate feelings of pride and excitement directed both toward nation, by ranking Canada in relation to other countries, and inward, toward the host city's (Vancouver's) association with the national success. We need look no further than the 1976 Montreal Olympics—where Canada won no gold medals and the Olympics were widely considered to be a disaster—to see the effects of failed medal index narrative. In short, when it comes to Canadian hosted Olympics, medal count matters to Canadians. With Vancouver's "successful" medal index narrative already secured, Vancouver was buzzing with excitement, even before the puck dropped for the men's gold medal hockey game.

The Puck Drops at Noon: Affect and Game Time

Typically, the men's gold medal match takes place in the afternoon of the final day of the Olympics. Vancouver was no exception; the game was scheduled to begin at 12:15 p.m. What is noteworthy is that the start time was the earliest on record. The feeling-technology (or theatrical mechanism that manages spectator experiences) of the game time moved feeling in several significant ways. First, it encouraged intergenerational spectatorship. As any veteran theatre producer knows, a midnight show attracts a different audience than a Sunday matinee. By scheduling the puck drop for the noon hour, the game was more likely to appeal to family spectatorship, and media outlets emphasized the presence of families and children among the crowd.³ Second, the game used daylight as a crowd control mechanism. On 28 February 2010 sunset was scheduled for approximately 5:54 p.m. An average hockey game takes two and a half hours. As such, the game was guaranteed to finish before sunset, meaning the celebrations would begin in daylight. As a result, uniformed police officers and the CCTV cameras were in full sight, reminding crowd members of the presence of surveillance and security. Finally, the daylight contributed to mood. This was not a night-club type atmosphere. While individuals might disappear within the sea of people gathered downtown, the light decreased anonymity; people and objects were recognizable. In addition, colours and textures—such as the red of the red mittens and flags carried by spectators—decorated the streets with

details that would have been difficult to identify in the darkness of night. This added both colour and texture to the Vancouver landscape, further heightening the celebratory vibe. At noon on 28 February, more than 150,000 people gathered in downtown Vancouver to watch the game. By 2:55 p.m., Ian Austin from *The Vancouver Province* described the crowd as "the happiest crowd in Canadian history."

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Rather than provide an exhaustive account of all the ideal conditions and orchestrations that contributed to the formation of "the happiest crowd in Canadian history," I have chosen to focus on the three aforementioned examples that speak to the breadth and range of factors at play. These factors do not simply reveal that the Olympics were well coordinated; mega-events like the Olympics, which involve thousands of moving parts, are often feats of organizational prowess. It is essential to recognize, however, that significant portions of this organizational prowess are dedicated to the generation and management of affective legacy. Specifically, while scholarship often examines the overall affective legacy of a mega-event, organizers focus much of their efforts on the construction of specific moments. The men's gold medal hockey game did not simply emerge as a defining moment of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics; organizers leveraged ideal conditions in combination with careful orchestrations in order to intentionally position the match as an affective landmark of the Games.



A pair of the famous Vancouver 2010 red mittens.
Photo by Kelsey Blair

Sport and Utopian Performatives

In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, Jill Dolan introduces the term “utopian performative,” which provides a precise vocabulary to examine the quality and strength of the feelings that circulated during and after the gold medal men’s hockey match. The term “utopian performative” describes “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5). For Dolan, utopian performatives are doings that allow for fleeting contact with an unstable, unfixed, unfinished utopia that gestures toward a better future. As anyone who has ever found themselves holding their breath alongside a rapt crowd as a puck whips around the ice will tell you, hockey can encourage precisely the kind of feelings Dolan describes.

Reporting on the game, Bruce Arthur from *The National Post* writes, “The game was played with a desperate ferocity, and at eye-watering speed. . . . Every puck mattered; every play mattered. Everything mattered.” Seven minutes and forty seconds into the overtime period, Canadian player Sidney Crosby took a shot. It hit the back of the net. The audience went wild. Sam Cooper and Kent Spencer describe the atmosphere after the game as “a connective feeling of national joy [that] took hold of the crowds—a shared emotion many said they’d never felt so strongly.” Dolan’s language productively expands on this description, and we might say the spectators were “allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public” (2). As a result of ideal conditions and careful orchestrations, audience members experienced the affective strength and quality of a utopian performative. Combined with the large-scale audience and magnified by the circulation of media representations of the game, this moment of utopian performativity secured the position of the gold medal men’s hockey match in Vancouver’s collective imaginary.

While many of the hockey game’s audience may have felt enthralled by the match, not everyone in Vancouver shared this experience. As sports scholars Mary McDonald and Alan Ingham argue, “A celebratory crowd is not homogeneous” (30). To paraphrase McDonald and Ingham, there are those in the crowd who proclaim, “If this performance stands for something, it does not stand for or by me” (30). What is important here is that, while there was undoubtedly a range of individual and counterpublic responses to the game, the men’s gold medal hockey match was part of dominant public discourse. Moreover, within the dominant cultural imaginary and as a result of the utopian performative it generated, the game became associated with a positive feeling. Significantly, it was the feeling and experience organizers had implicitly promised Vancouverites: the chance to partake in Canada’s hockey story; the opportunity to experience a moment of national celebration and joy if the men’s hockey team won a gold medal. This is not to say individual experiences were inauthentic. Rather, the crowd was willing to participate, to manage itself in order to be rewarded by national joy, and as I will suggest in my conclusion, this affective reward is something Canadians need to interrogate more closely.



The Canadian men’s hockey team celebrate their gold medal win at the 2010 Olympics.
Photo by S. Yume, CC-BY 2.0, [flickr.com/photos/syume/4399623511](https://www.flickr.com/photos/syume/4399623511)

The Affective Legacy of 2010 Olympic Games

Intangible legacies, are by their very nature, difficult to quantify. News reports and commentaries often emphasize the “joyous mood” during the Games, but it is uncertain if this “mood” had any longevity. It is evident, however, that the men’s gold medal hockey game contributed to the affective landscape of the 2010 Olympics. A study by Harry Hiller and Richard Wanner specifically highlights this contribution in relation to shifting opinions about hosting the Olympics, but the best evidence of the game’s significance is colloquial. Ask Vancouverites where they were during the men’s gold medal hockey game; whether their response is “downtown!” or “at a protest event,” it is highly likely they will have a response. This is not to say that all Vancouverites respond to the match in a homogenous way or are somehow united through their orientation to the game. Quite the opposite. A negative orientation to the game is as significant as a positive one.

It is clear how the men’s hockey match became a defining moment of the Vancouver Olympics, a key coordinate of the 2010 Olympic Games. What may be less clear is why this matters. After



all, everyone knows hockey is important to Canadians. It follows that a hockey game within the frame of a mega-event will be particularly important. Such an analysis is accurate, but it places too much emphasis on a general critique of sporting mega-events. For Canadians, there is more at stake. After all, the affective strength of the gold medal match functioned, in part, to overshadow the negative feelings surrounding the death of Georgian athlete Nodar Kumaritashvili at the beginning of the Games. Is that really something Canadians should be proud of? Moreover, the implicit promise and delivery of the experience of an Olympic hockey match hosted on Canadian soil encouraged Canadians and Vancouverites to turn a blind eye to social and political issues. This is the underbelly of the game's affective strength. Canadians were willing to trade complex tangible legacies for intense, but fleeting, positive feelings. Canadians, who have frequently been willing to overlook messy political issues in favour of good feelings (think of the rhetoric of "multiculturalism," for example), may have been particularly susceptible to the affective appeal of a gold medal men's hockey game. I do not mean to dismiss or belittle the intensity of any individual's experience. Rather, I want to encourage Canadians, and sport fans in particular, to interrogate how these

feelings were generated, what the effects of these feelings were, and at what cost we were willing to experience them.

Notes

- 1 For full descriptions of the atmosphere see Sam Cooper and Spencer Kent's article "City Throngs Celebrate Hockey Win; Joy Tops Street Rowdies" and Ian Austin's "Golden Ending for Olympics; Hockey Overtime Win Caps Best-Ever Games for Proud Canadian Finish."
- 2 For example of these commentaries see Cam Cole's article "The Team Couldn't Deliver; Oh-Oh Canada" and Ed Willes' "Apologies Required, but Not from Athletes; One Thing Own the Podium has Succeeded at is to Imbue Medallists with a Sense of Failure."
- 3 For one example of intergenerational spectatorship see Sam Cooper and Spencer Kent's article "City Throngs Celebrate Hockey Win; Joy Tops Street Rowdies."

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