

RITUALS; Slap-Shot Sundays, By Way of the Web

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Body

LIKE many immigrants living in New York City, I wanted to preserve some of the customs of my homeland, which is Canada. And, like many immigrants, I suspect, I have failed almost completely.

Last July 4, I climbed up on the roof of my building to watch the fireworks over the East River, but I barely took notice of Canada's birthday three days earlier. On Canadian Thanksgiving, we ordered in Chinese, the surest sign I had given up my native customs for New York's.

But there is one *ritual* I've managed to keep. Where I grew up, Saturday night is hockey night, which means that everyone west of Ottawa and east of Alberta is engaged in precisely the same activity: wondering how the Toronto Maple Leafs are going to blow it again this season. (Leaf fans are like Red Sox fans with short-term memory loss: they know the team is cursed; they just can't remember why.)

The real action every Saturday night takes place during the first intermission when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation shows a seven-minute segment called "Coach's Corner" featuring Don Cherry, a former career minor-league brawler and the coach of the Boston Bruins.

For those who haven't seen Mr. Cherry in action, imagine Howard Cosell's bluster, Bill O'Reilly's manners and Ted Baxter's suits. Each week, Mr. Cherry beats the same drums: the National Hockey League is destroying the sport, the politicians are destroying the country and his employers are trying to destroy him. He threatens the camera, mangles the names of Russian forwards and knocks away the moderating arm of his long-suffering co-host, Ron Maclean, like Atilla the Hun fighting for an armrest. Imagine "Crossfire" with actual physical contact.

And in a country where politeness, deference and order are the highest virtues (sample joke: How do you get all the Canadians out of a pool? You say "All Canadians out of the pool."), Mr. Cherry may be the only public figure not running for political office who declares that Canada is the greatest country on earth.

Even in Quebec, where Mr. Cherry is judged (unfairly) a French-baiting goon, the bars grow quiet during the first intermission as bartenders quietly switch the televisions over to the English network. The country may be divided, but everyone tunes in.

Except for me, sitting in my New York City apartment on a hockeyless Saturday night. For the first few months after I moved here, I called my friends, asking them to repeat Mr. Cherry's best lines. Eventually, my girlfriend in Toronto took pity on me and phoned during the intermission, holding the receiver to the television so that I could hear every monosyllable -- an extraordinary gesture from someone who once demanded that my own hockey equipment be kept in the garage. Or burned.

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Then, during the 2000 playoffs (Toronto lost, but how?), I discovered to my delight that the CBC was posting "Coach's Corner," the whole seven glorious minutes, on its Web site (cbc.ca/sports). There it was: the stitched face, the fractured English, the angry gestures, the plaid jackets that challenged the fastest Internet connection.

I bought a headset for my computer and every Sunday morning for the last two years, leaned closer to my monitor to take in every word, decipher every pixilated gesture.

When Mr. Cherry blamed the referees, I blamed the referees. When Mr. Cherry said Canadian players were the best in the world, I murmured "right on," and when the Canadian teams won both gold medals at the Olympics, I cheered. When Mr. Cherry choked up reading a letter from a father whose little boy had fallen through thin ice and died (while playing hockey, of course), I choked up too and worried about the coming spring thaw.

It was then that I began looking at "Coach's Corner" in a different way. The insults, the sentimentality, the two-fisted nationalism, the car-salesman suits had always represented something quintessentially Canadian to me. But watching over the Web, it suddenly all seemed so . . . American somehow. It made sense: Mr. Cherry spent most of his working life in the United States. Maybe he was right, after all. Maybe what I once thought was parochialism was really the unobstructed view of the outsider.

As I sat in my New York City apartment with my Starbucks coffee, fretting about thin ice, I realized that I was becoming an outsider, too. That's not all bad. After four years away, I can now declare out loud that Canada is the greatest country on the earth. But please, don't tell my friends back home.

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