

A hockey series that challenged Canadians' view of themselves

By Douglas Fisher

During Team Canada's first game in Stockholm, a nagging apprehension of mine became real. Nothing much could be done about it. Months before, I and other associates in Hockey Canada had compromised our control and direction of the operation in order to ensure that the U.S.S.R.-Canada hockey series took place.

The apprehension was that the behaviour and performance of the Canadian players and team management might be such as to hurt Canadian relations abroad — that what was stock or usual on our hockey scene would be translated as brutish and unsportsmanlike by foreigners. I was mindful of the reigning themes in our hockey, expressed in such popular aphorisms as "Nice guys don't win" or "If you can't lick them in the alley, you can't beat them on the ice".

Stockholm has a stolid and antiseptic air to it. The Johanneshall rink is spacious. The roominess of its aprons and seating run counter to the roaring, cockpit atmosphere of most hockey rinks. Fans need not stand to see incidents anywhere on the ice. Swedish fans are genteel by our standards. Perhaps the high cost of tickets for the Sweden-Team Canada games accentuated the sense of discretion and propriety which our players quickly challenged with vigorous stick-work, elbows and charging. Shortly after a wild scene in the penalty box area with several Canadian stars gesticulating about the ridiculous nature of their penalties and the incompetence of the referees, Alan Eagleson dropped into a seat beside me. He had been sitting several rows above in the distinguished company of ambassadors and ex-ambassadors.

I asked him if the view was better here. He said no, but he could no longer take his diplomatic neighbours' shocked reaction to the Canadians' play.

Eagleson's last word

Team Canada departed Stockholm for Moscow with Mr. Eagleson having the last word, telling the Swedish press that

Swedes as players and fans were "chicken", leaving the Canadian Embassy with the aftermath.

This is a rather out-of-context preface to a narrative and appreciation of the U.S.S.R.-Canada hockey series of September 1972. It is unusual in its personal emphasis. I use it to bring you quickly to Mr. Eagleson, executive director of the National Hockey League Players Association, because he symbolized for me the spirit and attitude of the Canadian team. It was his operation. He set its pattern.

If the unbelievable rally in Moscow which aroused Canada, if the certain defeat which became last-minute victory, was worth a lot — as millions seemed to think — then Mr. Eagleson deserves the chief credit. If many others abhor the means or some intrinsics in the behaviour which defeated the Russians, then they must ask themselves whether they are in tune with today's Canadianism. As I expressed my hunch in a newspaper column, Mr. Eagleson is probably more the archetypal Canadian than men like Mitchell Sharp and Maurice Strong.

We in Hockey Canada hoped to have a major international sporting event and a national happening of great interest out of the series. We wanted to establish the principle of "open play" between pros and so-called amateurs in international hockey.

Mr. Fisher, Canadian newspaper columnist and television commentator, has had a continuing interest in both amateur and professional sport. He was joint author of the report of the Federal Government's Task Force on Sport in 1969, which recommended changes in Canada's hockey development structure. He is currently chairman of Hockey Canada's executive committee. Before turning to political commentary, Mr. Fisher served for eight years as a federal Member of Parliament. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.

