

National Hockey League teams play a 76-game schedule, extending from early October to late March and culminating in an eight-team play-off. The symbol of professional hockey supremacy is the Stanley Cup, donated in 1893 by Lord Stanley of Preston during his term as Governor General of Canada.

A second major professional hockey league - the World Hockey Association - was formed in 1971. Ten teams took part in the 70-game schedule for the 1972-73 season. Today the WHA comprises the following 14 teams: Canada -- Quebec City Nordiques, Toronto Toros, Winnipeg Jets, Edmonton Oilers and Calgary Cowboys; United States -- New England Whalers (Hartford, Connecticut), Baltimore Clippers, Chicago Cougars, Cleveland Crusaders, Minnesota Fighting Saints (St. Paul), Indianapolis Racers, Phoenix Roadrunners, Houston Aeros and San Diego Mariners.

The viability of the new league was all but guaranteed by the acquisition of the NHL star player Bobby Hull by the Winnipeg team -- a move that encouraged other top players from the NHL to cast in their lot with the fledgling WHA.

The WHA trophy, the Avco Cup, was won in the league's founding year by the New England Whalers. For the 1973-74 season, it was won by the Houston Aeros, with the aid of the great Gordie Howe.

A recent move by the five Canadian teams to form their own division of the WHA is regarded by Canadians as a step in the "repatriation" of their national game.

Professional hockey is also played in three other North American Leagues -- the American Hockey League, the Western Hockey League and the Central Professional Hockey League. Canada has only one team in these leagues -- the Halifax Voyageurs of the American Hockey League. With few exceptions, however, professional hockey players are Canadian-born. Canadians generally take an intense interest in the fortunes of all professional teams, no matter where "home ice" may be situated.

Amateur leagues

Canada's top amateur trophy, the Allan Cup, was first awarded in 1908. Each spring Canada's various senior leagues declare winners and those from each province compete in the national senior finals for this coveted trophy. Though played in smaller arenas than the Montreal Forum or Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens, the Allan Cup finals often set attendance marks of nearly 50,000 for the entire playoff series.