



A Great Game: The Forgotten Leafs & The Rise of Professional Hockey

Stephen J. Harper

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Drawing on extensive archival records and illustrations, histories of the sport, and newspaper files, Canada's Prime Minister delves into the fascinating early years of ice hockey.

In the tumultuous beginnings of hockey, the fights were as much off the ice as on it. This engaging new book is about the hockey heroes and hard-boiled businessmen who built the game, and the rise and fall of legendary teams pursuing the Stanley Cup. With a historian's perspective and fan's passion, Stephen Harper presents a riveting and often-surprising portrait, capturing everything from the physical contests on the rinks to the battles behind the scenes and the changing social conventions of the twentieth century.

A Great Game shows that many things have stayed the same. Rough play, fervent hometown loyalties, owner-player contract disputes, dubious news coverage, and big money were issues from the get-go. Most important in these early years was the question: Was hockey to be a game of obsessed amateurs playing for the love of the sport, or was it a game for paid professionals who would give fans what they wanted? Who should be responsible for the sport – including its bouts of violence – both on and off the ice?

A century ago, rinks could melt, and by half time the blades screwed to the players' shoes could be sinking in mud. It was during this time that teams such as the Toronto Professionals of 1908 and the Toronto Blue Shirts of 1914 took turns battling for the city's very first Stanley Cup. Against the fanatical opposition of amateur hockey leaders, these "forgotten Leafs" would lay the groundwork for the world's most profitable hockey franchise.

In paying tribute to these hockey pioneers and the contagious loyalty of their fans, Harper resurrects the history of hockey's first decades. Lavishly illustrated with photographs of the game's greatest arenas and earliest star players, this entertaining and original book will captivate you from start to finish.

A Great Game: The Forgotten Leafs & The Rise of Professional Hockey Details

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Hockey Stephen J. Harper

From Reader Review A Great Game: The Forgotten Leafs & The Rise of Professional Hockey for online ebook

Kaiser_matias says

This is not a popular history of hockey in Toronto. It is a detailed, academic study of the development of professional hockey and the struggle against amateurism in Toronto until 1917.

If one keeps that in mind, it is a great book. Harper showcases a great talent in scholarly study on the topic, and provides a great argument in this book. He provides a clear picture of the rise of professional hockey in Toronto, and Ontario as a whole, at the start of the 20th century. It is a subject little studied by hockey historians, and this offers a great addition to those looking at a serious history of the sport.

The addition of photos of nearly all the players mentioned throughout the book is also a nice touch, and despite being a rather obscure subject makes for a fairly easy read.

Justin says

A good read for anyone with even a passing interest in hockey or history. Mr. Harper though failed to maintain a simple naming convention throughout the book. With his knowledge of the material, I'm sure he can identify many of the associations, clubs etc... by their many names or nicknames. For someone perhaps less familiar with the different names, his habit of alternating how he references a particular entity can be hard to follow.

Darcy McLaughlin says

"A Great Game" is a book that can be absolutely fascinating at its best, and a bit dull at its worst. This all really hinges upon how big of a hockey fan you are. For someone who's deeply passionate about the game, Harper's account of hockey's infancy can be very interesting. Watching how the sport has evolved since its inception on and off the ice. It is also a period of sports history that has been largely forgotten by hockey fans. If you told someone that teams like the Kenora Thistles battled for the Stanley Cup they might think you were making things up.

The one downfall I found in this book is a typical shortcoming in a lot of historical non-fiction. Somehow you've got to get those facts in, and at times they can pile up too frequently and give the impression of reading a textbook. Harper does fairly well to avoid this, but there are still instances (e.g. recounting team rosters many many times) where I found myself feeling a little bored. Still, it's a fascinating look into the world of hockey and the evolution of pro sport.

Jo-Ann says

No one is more surprised and yet pleasantly so that I have found the first interest that Stephen Harper and I share! History, Canadian for that matter, and shockingly so for me - the growth of hockey in this country and

in the United States.

Who knew?

I retrieved this book from my late father's library and admit I was off to a very slow start. However, I finally picked it up again and could not put it down. John Ross Robertson, Bruce Ridpath, Newsy Lalonde and on. Mr. Harper provides us with the machinations and shenanigans between two factions - the amateurs and the "rising" professionals, and their battles to maintain the top position philosophically and practically in the world of hockey. While many aspects have changed, the rigour, not to mention the violence, remains part of the culture, as well as the devotion, at times fanaticism of the fans. I enjoyed the writing, the detailed research and especially the "Overtime" chapter - where did they all end up? I am not at all a hockey aficionada, but I really enjoyed this book and do hope our former Prime Minister writes more, whether on this topic or others. I saw Mr. Harper's cameo on "Murdoch Mysteries" which suggested to me at the time that he may have a love of history; "A Great Game" proves this.

Jennifer says

I'm giving it only three stars, because while I found the information fascinating, it reads like a legal document. A well written book, regardless of topic, should have a rhythm. Like a well written song it should flow easily. Harper's writing has starts and stops. It's disjointed. I was forced to repeatedly refer back to earlier pages in order to figure out what the hell he was on about.

John says

I think it is only fair to address the fact that this book was written by the Prime Minister. The reaction of most people when they saw me reading this was fairly negative: "ew, Steven Harper." This is just silly and unfair. I have not voted for the guy, nor am I likely to in future, but he's not an evil man, and in fact, I wouldn't mind hanging out with him and talking hockey, based on the informative and conversational tone of this book. The acknowledgments note the hand of Roy McGregor as a significant editor, so I would not be surprised if he did write a lot of it. So maybe it Roy I'd want to hang out with. Still, all this aside, this was a very interesting book. It uncovers the history of pro hockey in its heartland, southern Ontario and Quebec, at the turn of the century. It's fairly descriptive, but it needs to be, given that it is based on a limited historical record. Harper makes good use of old newspaper stories to capture the feel of the era. The coolest thing that I learned from this book was that both the Leafs and the Habs come from the same lineage. One franchise was created, then sold, moved to Toronto, then restarted again in Montreal. Leafs and Canadiens, separated at birth!

Simon Creary says

Written with clarity and purpose -- clearly, the work of someone who loves the game of ice-hockey. The warmth, with which Stephen Harper describes his characters, was surprising, but perhaps it shouldn't be, as I don't know the man, personally.

A note worthy contribution to the history of ice-hockey, and Canada, from one ice-hockey/ history buff to another: PM Harper to simple Canadian, American: Simon Creary. s.

Joseph Gambin says

Although I am a fan of the PM and a huge hockey fan the most I could give this book is three stars.

It was well researched and I did learn a lot about the battles between the supporters of professionalism and the supporters of amateurism. However it was mostly a recounting of events that had very little analysis. The only real analysis came within the last few pages of book's final chapter.

This book is a good read for those really interested in the history of our great sport but don't expect any thought provoking insights.

On an aside, this book should end any debate about whether the PM is truly a hockey fan or has adopted the persona for political purposes. Only a true fan would have given up his precious spare time in order to conduct the required research and put the effort into writing this book.

Nathan says

An enjoyable book that traces an interesting bit of history going on through political and economic turmoil.

Stephen says

For the hockey fans out there, don't let the name deceive you. It's about so much more than the Leafs. This book rather looks into the evolution of hockey in its earliest days, leaving you with the feeling more connected to the complex organism that is the game of today.

Matthew Antosh says

As it's obligatory, I have to point out that I do not care for Mr. Harper, his politics or his party.

With that out of the way, I went into this book with an expectation to glean some sort of political message from it. I was somewhat disappointed in that it's a rather straight forward and dispassionate account of the early days of hockey in Ontario and particularly Toronto. The most interesting parts of it were the intrigue of amateur v. professional and the leaders that argued that out in the press. It's kinda boring when it comes to the actual depictions of the games played.

If there is a political message in the book it is expressed in the first few and last chapters, it would be that the development of hockey, like the development of Canada and Capitalism, is intensively connected to our role in the British Empire. But that's a very small part of the book; Harper seems to be more interested in the stats and the individual players than other things.

I probably gave an extra star for how well the book is designed; It's a very attractive book, with full colour inserts and has an old-world hockey feel to it.

Brandon says

Before I even begin this review, I'm checking my opinion of Mr. Harper at the door. I'm strictly going to review the book based on the book itself and not touch on the character of our Prime Minister.

Is there anything more Canadian than this? The Prime Minister of Canada writes a book about hockey. Regardless of your feelings on Stephen Harper the politician, Stephen Harper the author, is a driven, research heavy machine.

Before I read this, I had no idea that there was such a fierce battle fought against professionalism in hockey. At the turn of the 20th century, there were a few people who staunchly believed that the sport should only be contested by pure amateurs; that once players began receiving money, it would corrupt the heart of the game. And for a while, they could have been considered correct. Once cold hard cash was up for grabs, all players were considering themselves up for grabs. They could accept offers from all clubs regardless of where they last laced up their skates thus creating a wealth of consistent free agents.

Unfortunately, Harper spends too much time delving into detailed play by play analysis of the hockey games themselves and while he does a very good job emphasizing the atmosphere of the crowd, the horrific ice conditions and the intense level of play, it isn't long before it begins to feel repetitive. Games began to blend together and I found my mind wandering, wanting to get back into the political battles off the ice.

There's no denying that Harper did his homework as there's a wealth of information jammed between the covers. My main issue is that I think consuming the excellent narrative non-fiction books from Erik Larson (*The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*) has lessened my appreciation for textbook style, info-dumping history pieces like Harper's hockey book.

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Chuck Slack says

You really can't get more Canadian than having the Prime Minister of Canada writing a book on the early history of professional hockey in Toronto and the beginnings of the Maple Leafs and the NHL.

Mr. Harper certainly did his research. He presents his subject concisely with straight ahead prose.

A good read and one I enjoyed. Good on Mr. Harper donating the proceeds from this book to the families of those that served in the Canadian Military.

Alex Gregory says

As an avid reader and purveyor of thrift stores, I would argue that are few books as ubiquitous on thrift shelves as there is *A Great Game*, then-sitting Prime Minister Stephen (J.) Harper's treatise on professional hockey in Toronto at the dawn of the 20th century.

I'm of two minds about this book. On one hand, it's a well-researched, compelling profile of a team and a

time that have been oft-neglected in hockey history, and focuses on a handful of compelling characters with their own arcs and issues they had to overcome to push the team (which didn't even have an official name) from amateur to professional.

On the other, this is an absolute vanity work written by a sitting prime minister, "meticulously researched" over the course of several years. It smacks of egotism and begs questions of how effective Harper was in his job if he was spending a not-so-insignificant amount of time researching and writing this book.

The big problem I have with the book is that it comes across as overly clinical, written almost as a long-form university final thesis. There's no doubt that it's well-researched and competently written, but the material noticeably drags at points and you get the sense that the author is more in love with his own writing style as opposed to letting the spirit of the story and characters shine through. That, and Harper seems to argue that amateur hockey is nigh-useless and professional hockey is always going to rule the roost, ignoring the countless teams that have made their mark on small towns across the country because they were amateurs or untested.

It's a testament to editor/manuscript-reader/possibly-uncredited writer Roy McGregor (of *Home Game* and *Escape* fame) that the characters shine through as they did, and there are a lot of asides that give you a better feel for the flavour of Toronto as it stood at the dawn of the century.

In the end, I can only give *A Great Game* a conditional pass. Great if you want to learn more about local hockey history, but the writing style and circumstances behind the book's creation can put off some readers.

Ron says

Well written history of hockey in Canada before the NHL. There is much general history for the non-hockey fan as well. For the hockey historian this book is a treasure. Well done Mr. Harper.
