STUDENT ESSAY

WHICH UNIFORM TO SERVE THE WAR: HOCKEY IN CANADA VERSUS MILITARY SERVICE DURING WORLD WAR TWO

by

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Introduction

Hockey is the Canadian metaphor, the rink a symbol of this country's vast stretches of water and wilderness, its extremes of climate, the player a symbol of our struggle to civilize such a land... In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the dance of life, an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter we are alive.

Bruce Kidd, The Death of Hockey

During periods of national crisis, questions on the relative value of various social and economic activities are often raised and debated. One of the issues in Canada during the Second World War was the value of the practice of professional hockey to the war effort. Opinion was mixed. Some felt that hockey represented a frivolous waste of valuable resources. Others, equally critical, felt that it was undignified for hockey players to "play and be paid" while their neighbours died for them in Europe and the South Pacific. Still others argued that hockey did indeed provide a valuable contribution to the war effort by boosting morale on the homefront with an entertaining distraction for devastated citizens worried about world events. During this time of conflict one of Canada's most sacred cultural institutions, the game of hockey, came under attack on the homefront.

Professional hockey players found themselves caught up in a national debate involving the issue of conscription for overseas service in the war. The players, like many average Canadians, were confused over the direction that the government would pursue regarding national conscription policies. At the outbreak of the war in 1939, the Liberal government under the leadership of Mackenzie King did not issue a standard policy of conscription. This course of action allowed individuals to define their own roles in the Canadian war effort. Yet within the country, there were some who would challenge this position. Some outspoken critics believed that young men, no matter what their social status, should be subject to conscription.
Hockey players held wide acclaim in Canadian society, and their high profile was envied by many. The strong, durable hockey player personified the Canadian ideal of the able-bodied representative required by the armed forces. Owing to the hockey players' almost mythical standing within the Canadian popular psyche, some officials on the National War Services Boards attempted to coerce these young men into enlisting in the Canadian armed forces. Throughout 1941 and 1942 hockey players found themselves being subjected to ridicule by these government-appointed officials.

Both government bureaucrats and influential members of the print media tried to sway public opinion against hockey players engaging in sport rather than in war. However, some members of the media came to the defence of hockey, the men who played the sport, and its usefulness during wartime. These two conflicting opinions regarding the role of hockey and its participants were expressed primarily in the daily newspapers and major magazines and periodicals. Numerous editorial pages and sports columns took definitive stances on this subject. Although the war started in September 1939, the zenith of the debate took place in fall 1941 and spring 1942, shortly before Mackenzie King's famous plebiscite on conscription.

The catalyst for the hockey debate stemmed from a decision by a Manitoba judge to deny passports to six Canadian men attempting to cross the border into the United States to play hockey. The ruling propelled hockey players into the national spotlight. Questions were raised concerning not only the game itself, but also the morality of the individual who chose hockey over military service while the nation was engaged in a perilous conflict.

This was part of the reason the furor over hockey and wartime duty generated an emotional debate during this critical time in Canadian history. Although they eventually were allowed to play, a unique element of Canadian life was being subjected to what was perceived by some as unwarranted scrutiny.

In order to assess both professional hockey's response to the war and the national debate which preoccupied many Canadians, this study will examine the status of hockey as expressed through the major newspapers and editorials. It will be argued that hockey's deep roots in Canadian culture ensured the preservation of the game during wartime. Similarly, the arguments against will be placed into their historical context.

The debate over wartime hockey took place within a particular historical context and offers a snapshot of Canadian attitudes towards an interesting social dilemma. Unfortunately, there has been little scholarly writing on the debate over the role of professional hockey during wartime.