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This article examines the position of the Canadian Football League (CFL) in 1990s Canada, the popular discourses surrounding it of a nostalgia for an idealized “Canada”, and the crisis of Canadian identity as the North American continent became increasingly integrated through the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA. Our focus is particularly on the decline and eventual extinction of the Ottawa Rough Riders, a football club located in the national capital that traced its roots to 1876, almost to the time of Canadian Confederation (1867). In this case study, we discuss the demise of Ottawa and the media framing of the loss of a team in the national capital in Canada’s distinctive form of football. Nostalgia for an idealized Canada (in the Anglo-Canadian sense) was thus generated in media discourse that reinforced and helped to shape public perceptions of “Canada” in crisis. In sport, mediated nostalgic representation has been rife in recent years as professional sporting teams in North America, Australia, Britain, and elsewhere have moved to new cities and stadia, or been targets for mergers and extinction. In Canada a mediated nostalgia also has worked to generate longings for an idealized Canada threatened by the greater integration with the United States brought on by NAFTA.

The history of Canada is a chronicle of an extended debate about the construction of national identity. As Joseph Maguire suggests, identities...
are neither natural or fixed: “Rather they are socially constructed and are subject to change over time and place”.¹ In the Canadian case an ambivalence about the proximity and intrusiveness of American culture and uncertainties about the long term relationship of the province of Quebec to Canada as a nation have both had marked effects on Anglo-Canadian national identity. In recent years, events in Canadian sport have often been articulated as cultural turning points in the development of a sense of Canadian uniqueness.² In the 1990s, further expansion of the National Hockey League (NHL) and new expansion of the CFL into the American market as well as frequent reports of Canadian professional sporting franchises being in financial straits (e.g., the BC Lions, Calgary Stampeders, Hamilton Tiger-Cats, Montreal Alouettes, Ottawa Rough Riders, Saskatchewan Roughriders, and Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the CFL; Edmonton Oilers, Ottawa Senators, Quebec Nordiques, and Winnipeg Jets of the NHL) have threatened the stability of this construction. Canadian professional sports teams seemed to lurch from one crisis to another. Two Canadian NHL teams, Quebec and Winnipeg in ice hockey, were relocated to the United States (Denver and Arizona, respectively), and the Ottawa Rough Riders in the CFL had folded by early 1997, while most other Canadian professional franchises faced one or more financial crises.³

In recent years developments in professional sport in Canada seem often to be at the forefront of concerns about the preservation of a distinctively Canadian identity and the capacity of Canadian culture to resist Americanizing trends. In a classic case of adaptation to the NAFTA climate, CFL Commissioner Larry Smith suggested in 1994 that the league’s future was not in Canada, but through expansion in the United States. The CFL’s strategy temporarily followed that of the NHL, which viewed large southern and western American cities as more lucrative markets than Canadian cities that wanted a team, such as Hamilton and Saskatoon. The CFL American franchises were more troubled and unstable than franchises in Canada with the exception of the Baltimore Stallions, who won the CFL’s Grey Cup in 1995 and who played in Memorial Stadium, former home of the Baltimore Colts of the NFL. The Colts owner, Robert Irsay, moved the beloved NFL team to Indianapolis in 1984. Baltimore had not had professional football since then until the arrival of the Stallions (who were to be called the Colts, but this was blocked by the NFL). Due to the lack of success in the United States and the relocation of the Cleveland Browns to Baltimore in late 1995, the CFL abandoned its American experiment, as all the franchises were losing money and new owners were virtually impossible to find. Attempted relocations to new U.S. markets also failed to attract the required corporate and municipal interest to sustain any new efforts to maintain an American beachhead. The CFL returned to its Canadian roots in 1996, repacked in the slogan “Radically Canadian”. The return to Canada and the attempts to revitalize the CFL as a genuinely