

J. Andrew Ross, *Joining the Clubs: The Business of the National Hockey League to 1945*. Syracuse, NY: [Syracuse University Press](#), 2015. xv + 442 pp, photographs, figures, tables, map, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN 9780815633839, Cdn \$81.00, distributed in Canada by [Scholarly Book Services, Inc.](#)

This is the work of a serious academic work of business historian trying to uncover the details of the emergence of the most important professional association in the field of hockey. *Joining the Clubs* is only the second academic monograph to focus on the early history of the National Hockey League (NHL). Many existing historical accounts of hockey and the NHL were not written by professional historians and did not rely on a consistent system of research and annotation. In contrast to the professionalization of the sport itself, it thus seems that until recently an amateur tradition has prevailed in the historical narratives about hockey and the NHL. This book is a valuable addition to a growing academic literature on the business of sport.

The main concerns of the author are twofold. On the one hand, he wants to understand how NHL came into being and what factors have accounted for its success over other existing leagues. On the other hand, he is interested in following the individuals connected to the NHL to comprehend how some of them became so powerful within that structure. In other words, he provides an account of the history of the NHL that links the fate of the league with the actions and decisions of the individuals within the organization. He thus develops a nested account of the history of the league, teams, managers and entrepreneurs connected in developing hockey as a business and a cultural manifestation.

This is in fact the core thesis of Ross' book. He argues that hockey as a sport and the NHL as its governance body have thrived over the years not only because hockey was properly managed as a business activity, but because it was also considered as a cultural phenomena. The success and resilience of the League (and the sport) was predicated on the ability of NHL managers and entrepreneurs to develop a product that satisfied its economic interests by creating an administrative structure to oversee, regulate and control the League's governance. This was accomplished while recognizing hockey's importance as a cultural attraction thus aligning the NHL to the expectations and demands of its varied classes of spectators. On the top of that, the NHL was able to do so in a way that would rule out competitors or discourage them from attempting to create other similar competing bodies.

In its path to becoming a successful institution the NHL and its parent association the National Hockey Association had to deal with various challenges, which constitute the main underlying themes of the book. The first two institutional contradictions faced by early entrepreneurs were the commercialization and professionalization of the sport. The association of hockey with leisure and club camaraderie was in clear contrast with the view of hockey as spectacle and commercial activity. Similarly, the view of the sport as an element of class distinctiveness and its association with the amateur ideology conflicted with a definition of hockey as an industry and a professional activity. The emergence of the business model for professional hockey and the rise of the NHL as its

primary governance body became possible by bringing together the commercialization and professionalization of the sport into a whole new system.

In addition to these contradictions, the success of the NHL is also attached to the ability of its managers in taking decisions regarding other managerial challenges. At least four important problems to which the NHL has provided adequate solutions have been described. First, as in any other league, it demands that a balance between the individual interests of the shareholders of the teams and the interests of the league be reached. In the NHL this was done with the separation of ownership and control of the league through the hiring of Frank Calder to be the League's president. Second, external competition also posed problems to the maintenance of the league. The ease with which new leagues were assembled and the growing demand for games and players in different regions would be managed only with the creation of a hierarchical system of minor and major leagues. Third, war and economic depression created additional challenges that put in contrast the business expectations and the needs of society. The success of the NHL can also be attributed to the ability of its managers in making concessions at the same time they struggled to reach favourable agreements and keep business as usual. Finally, the expansion of the NHL to the United States created an additional administrative problem to be solved. This move generated many criticisms regarding the selling of hockey and the progressive Americanization of the Canadian sport. But in spite of the critiques, the NHL was able to rebrand itself as an international organization and to keep its position as the main governance body for hockey in North America.

This is a book worth reading for both academics and hockey aficionados. Ross provides a detailed historical narrative on the role of the NHL and the people that contributed to its development. In this, it differs from many accounts that mention the NHL in passing as they describe the creation and dissolution of other leagues and teams as well as the lives of players and the results of games. In defining such a research object, he provides a companion contribution to Wong's (2005) detailed work on the NHL. However, in focusing too narrowly in the NHL and its internal dynamics, it sometimes fails to look at the sport as a cultural activity and to provide a richer account of the institutional context in which it was embedded. As a result, what has been suggested in the beginning of the book as one of its contributions is left behind. Ironically, the author has provided an opening that might foster the development of new research on the cultural side of the business or the development of a cultural business history of the NHL.

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