

HERITAGE OR HEALTH?: RECENTRING SPORT IN CANADA

A brief to The Standing Committee on the Status of Women and
The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage House of Commons Parliament of Canada

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Thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee on November 21st, 2022 and for accepting briefs regarding the study. This brief is informed by research in the field and research conducted by Dr. Fowler, Dr. Moore and Dr. Tim Skuce. Thank you for convening the committee regarding the study of women and girls in sport, and our hope is that sport becomes a safe place for children and families to flourish.

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During the 1950s and 1960s, the Canadian men's ice hockey team was highly successful on the international stage winning the gold medal at the 1950 and 1952 Winter Olympics, and the World Ice Hockey Championships in 1950, 1951, 1952, 1955, 1958, and 1959. At the time, the Team Canada men's ice hockey team was the most dominant team internationally, made up of primarily amateur players.

However the heritage of one of our national sports was in question as other nations were showing their expertise at men's ice hockey as the 1960s were not as successful as the previous decade. The team did win the World Ice Hockey Championships in 1961, but the 1960's saw a decline in the dominance of Canadian teams in international hockey, as other countries began to develop more competitive teams such as Sweden and the Soviet Union (Hockey Canada, 2022).

Men's ice hockey in Canada has been a long standing pillar of what it means to be Canadian and many Canadians regard hockey as our only national sport. In Canada, 1,239,000 people over the age of 15 play hockey; 22% of children between the ages of 5 and 14 play hockey; there are 37,500 organized hockey teams; and 48% of Canadians say hockey is a source of pride in Canada (CBC News, 2013). While registration in minor hockey has been declining, due to the violence, the exclusionary homogeneity, the high cost, and the limiting ice times, men's ice hockey remains a source of pride for Canada and Canadians.

While our pride has been tested this past summer as we learned of the deeply disturbing actions taken by members of Hockey Canada and players who represented Canada at the World Ice Hockey Championships in 2018 and 2003, researchers have been working to make hockey safer by addressing concerns such as class, racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of oppression (see open letter sent to Hon. Pascale St-Onge, Sport Minister, and Hon. Hedy Fry, Chair of the Heritage Committee on July 26, 2022). Athletes as well have been speaking out about their experiences of oppression through media outlets such as The Players Tribune and we are still awaiting resolutions to address the inability of men's ice hockey and hockey culture to be a safe place for all children and youth. In addition, the work by the Black Girls Hockey Club also highlights the fact that hockey culture is not a safe place for fans of colour.

While the birth of hockey remains a contested debate, the national pride of hockey, even though tested, remains. Nationalism is a political ideology that emphasizes the importance of a nation or national identity and is defined as a group of people with a common culture, language, history, or ethnicity. Nationalism often promotes the idea of unity and loyalty among members of the nation and may lead to the development of a strong national identity.

In the context of sport, nationalism can be seen through the promotion of national teams and athletes, and the use of sport as a means to promote national identity and unity through podium pursuits in international arenas. It can also be seen as a way of promoting the country and its

culture to the world. However, it can also lead to the development of a nationalistic attitude that prioritizes winning over fair play. In turn, sport becomes commercialized, selling the idea of a nation and promoting a particular brand of nationalism. Alongside nationalist motivations, sport is also increasingly corporatized and commodified.

The commodification of sport is the way in which sport becomes a commodity, or something that can be bought and sold in the marketplace such as through the sale of tickets to sporting events, the sale of merchandise and memorabilia related to sports teams and athletes, and the sale of broadcasting rights for sporting events. This then leads to the commercialization of sport, where sport is used as a means to generate profits. This can result in the prioritization of financial gain over the integrity and spirit of the sport, and can also lead to the exploitation of athletes, coaches and fans.

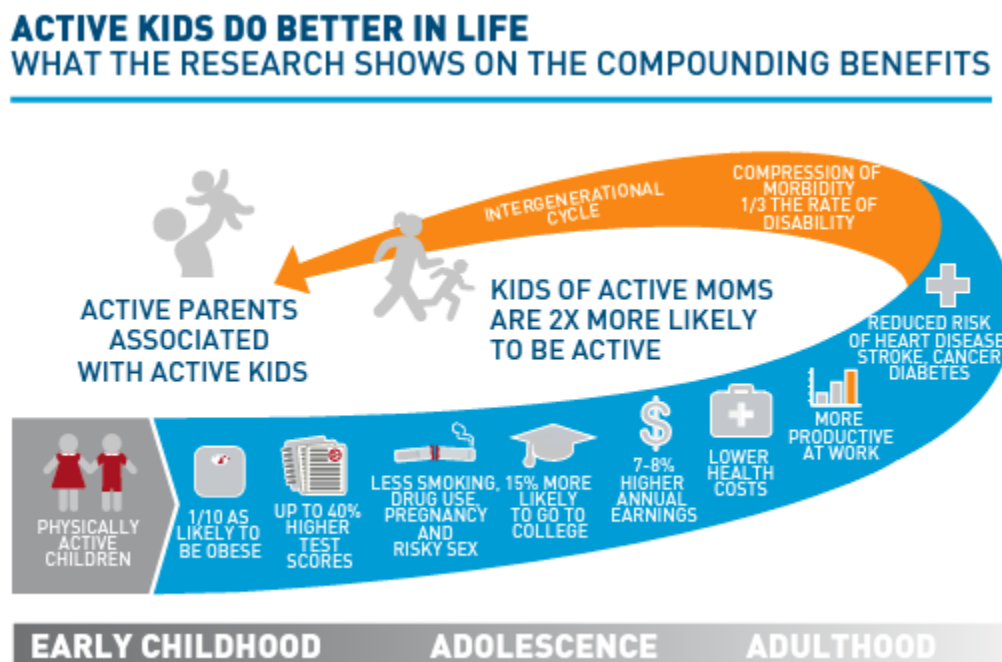
Testimony to this committee revealed the exploitation and abuse experienced by children in gymnastics. MacLean's (McKeon, 2023) magazine recently highlighted more stories of exploitation and abuse. Men's ice hockey also faces a reckoning with respect to the alleged gang-rapes by the 2003 and 2018 World Junior teams, in addition to other stories of abuse and hazing (Canadian Press, 2022; Moore, Fowler, Skuce, 2022; National Post, n.d.). Other sports such as soccer and basketball also have abuse issues (CBC News, 2022; Davidson, 2022). Sport in Canada is not safe for children thus we need to ask ourselves, what heritage is being preserved by the Ministry of Canadian Heritage? Or, at what cost, are we preserving heritage?

During the gold medal drought experienced by the men's ice hockey team, sport and recreation fell within the purview of different government bodies and departments before they were assigned to the newly created portfolio of Canadian Heritage. Before this, there was no specific department or ministry in the federal government that had the overall responsibility for sport and recreation leaving both to be handled by a variety of different departments, such as the Department of Health and Welfare, and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, along with the Provinces and Territories.

The Department of Canadian Heritage was created in 1993 by the government of Canada as part of a larger reorganization of the federal government (Thibault & Jarvey, 2013). The main reason for its creation was to promote and preserve Canadian culture and identity and to have a dedicated department to focus on cultural issues such as arts, heritage, and sport and to coordinate and implement cultural policies across the federal government and with other levels of government and stakeholders – to “play a vital role” in the lives of Canadians.

In 2015, the Aspen Institute shared its report Project Play which provided an in-depth picture of youth sports in the United States, including the barriers to youth accessing safe sport and ways to improve sport for children. Sport offers substantial benefits throughout a person's life (as outlined in Figure 1). Recognizing these benefits, we must ensure that sport remains accessible and safe for all athletes. We believe that sport needs to be within the portfolio of Health, rather than Heritage to ensure the focus moves from podium pushes to improving the quality of life of Canadians.

Figure 1. Benefits of participating in sport (Aspen Institute, 2015).



The lens to which we view sport needs to be one of health. Our recommendations to the committee through this brief are simple. We offer two which we believe encourage our country to place the safety of sport and the health of athletes over nation building. Positioning sport within heritage has prioritized the nation over athletes, and invited a win at all costs mentality that has invited abuse.

1. We support a call for a judicial inquiry into sport in Canada. A judicial inquiry is a powerful mechanism to reveal truths and to encourage accountability and transparency in government and other public institutions that receive funding from the federal government.
2. We call on the Government of Canada to move sport from the portfolio of Canadian Heritage into Health.

From the Government of Canada's (2023) website:

Canadian Heritage and its portfolio organizations play a vital role in the cultural, civic and economic life of Canadians. Arts, culture and heritage represent more than \$57 billion in the Canadian economy and close to 673,000 jobs in sectors such as film and video, broadcasting, music, publishing, archives, performing arts, heritage institutions, festivals and celebrations.

And

Health Canada is responsible for helping Canadians maintain and improve their health. It ensures that high-quality health services are accessible, and works to reduce health risks.

By shifting sport into Health, the lens changes. The focus changes. Instead of chasing medals through the commodification of sport, sport is centered on health, not on reducing obesity, increasing well-being, and providing children and families means to live active and healthy lives.

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Additional Website Link

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Players' Tribune: <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/>