

COMMENTARY »

Why Oilers aren't 'Canada's team' in Cup Final

By IAN MENDES

The Authors

In the aftermath of the Edmonton Oilers clinching their spot in the Stanley Cup Final, the question to Connor McDavid on the podium was predictable.

Winnipeg, Vancouver and Toronto also had Stanley Cup aspirations this spring, but Edmonton is the last Canadian team standing. And so the question to the Oilers superstar was somewhat inevitable, as Edmonton is on the precipice of wiping out a Canadian Stanley Cup drought that has lasted more than three decades.

"Can you talk about being Canada's team?" a reporter asked McDavid on Sunday evening. "Everybody coast to coast is cheering for the Oilers. Any added pressure with that?"

McDavid seamlessly stick-handled the question.

"We're a Canadian team and we've got great Canadian fans," responded McDavid. "And it feels good to maybe unite the country a little bit and bring people together."

It's a nice, easy narrative, isn't it? A hockey-obsessed nation that is starving for its championship trophy to rightfully be returned north of the border.

It's a storyline repeatedly pushed by a Boston Pizza commercial that seems to play during every single TV timeout and intermission in these playoffs. The commercial opens by relaying the heartbreak of several Canadian teams since Montreal's magical run to a Stanley Cup title in 1993.

Somebody has punched through drywall after Vancouver lost Game 7 to the Rangers in 1994.

A Toronto fan has thrown a plate through their television screen after losing to Carolina in the conference final.

An Oilers fan repeatedly runs over their flat-screen TV with a pickup truck following a second-round loss to Anaheim in 2017.

And a bitter Montreal fan tosses their AM radio to the ground after the Canadiens lost to Tampa in the Stanley Cup Final in 2021.

(The Flames' and Senators' runs to the Stanley Cup Final in 2004 and 2007, respectively, were omitted from the commercial. But hey, there is only so much Canadian misery you can shoehorn into a 30-second spot.)

The message of the commercial is simple: Canadian NHL fans have only known bitter disappointment over the last 30 years. It's time for hockey fans in this country to put aside their deep-rooted, historical rivalries and pull in the same direction.

As the commercial draws to a close, fans are gathered inside a Boston Pizza sports bar clad in merchandise that is just generic enough to skirt a trademark infringement suit from the NHL. But it's clearly meant to show a Canucks fan and a Flames fan high-fiving at the bar. A Senators fan and a Canadiens fan standing side by side. An Oilers fan and a Leafs fan clinking full beer glasses together.

"A Canadian team hasn't won the Stanley Cup in 30 years. Maybe it's time to try something different," the commercial urges. "This year, let's team up with the fans we've always cheered against."



JOHN WOODS

From left, Edmonton Oilers Cody Ceci, Darnell Nurse, Mattias Janmark and Connor Brown celebrate Nurse's goal against the Winnipeg Jets during the third period of a game on Nov. 30, 2023, in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

This commercial and the reporter's question to McDavid, however, are rooted in pure fantasy — not reality.

Will some casual hockey fans in Canada be pulling for the Oilers over the Panthers? Absolutely.

Will some big NHL fans in this country be hoping that McDavid — the absolute best player of his generation — winds up with a Stanley Cup ring? You bet.

But will the majority of die-hard hockey fans in this country be actively rooting for the Oilers as if they were cheering on their own team? Forget it.

Sure, most Canadians want the Stanley Cup drought to end, but with a very important caveat: only if it happens for their favourite team. Otherwise, it's just like watching your neighbour win the lottery. I suppose it's nice for them, but what does it do for you?

Consider this social media poll from Sportsnet 650 in Vancouver after the two Stanley Cup Finalists were determined. Of the 1,531 people who cast a vote, more than 70% of them said they would be cheering for the Panthers. Only 16.4%

said they would be actively rooting for Edmonton, while almost the same number (12.9%) said they would remain completely neutral.

And yes, Vancouver fans — who would have made up the vast majority of that poll — might be bitter because Edmonton did eliminate them in the second round.

But that's the whole point. You cannot simply ask a Vancouver fan to temporarily suspend their hatred of an Edmonton team that just bounced them from the playoffs. Nor can you ask a Calgary fan to ignore decades of hatred and bitterness in the Battle of Alberta to suddenly pull for their provincial rival. In fact, Calgary fans have full permission to sit out this entire Stanley Cup Final.

The trifecta of Montreal-Toronto-Ottawa will never cheer for one another, and while Winnipeg always seems like the most likeable Canadian team, it's not like they have forged a national identity of any kind.

It's a ridiculous question we wrestle with each time a Canadian team is still alive after Victoria Day. Should we embrace the last Canadian team standing for the sake of national pride?

But the answer is always in

plain sight.

Consider the backlash in Toronto to when the CN Tower — the city's most iconic building — was lit up in red, white and blue in the summer of 2021 to commemorate the Montreal Canadiens reaching the Stanley Cup Final.

That felt awkward and it created such a stir that a spokesperson for the CN Tower had to release a statement explaining, "It is a federally owned and operated property that belongs to all Canadians."

When the Canucks were the last Canadian team standing in the COVID-19 bubble in the summer of 2020, our James Mirtle and Sean McIndoe had a fun and spirited debate over the idea of Vancouver being Canada's team.

But to definitively settle this argument, we should compare the Oilers' run to what the Toronto Raptors went on to achieve in the summer of 2019, it felt like the entire country was galvanized. There were massive viewing parties being held all across Canada.

In Abbotsford, B.C., more than 1,500 fans turned up to watch Game 5 of the Raptors-Warriors series inside the Abbotsford

Centre. At the opposite end of the country in the Maritimes, there were massive viewing parties for Raptors games in places like Halifax and Moncton.

That summer, Cineplex Odeon opened up 33 movie theatres across the country to show Raptors games on the big screen.

"Canadian fans are invited to unite and rally behind the Raptors as they face-off against the Golden State Warriors, live on the big screen," their press release stated. Surely, they must be doing the same for Canada's team — the Edmonton Oilers — here in 2024, right?

Alas, a Cineplex Odeon spokesperson told The Athletic this week. "Currently, we are not scheduled to show the Stanley Cup Final series in theatres as cinema rights haven't been granted."

And maybe that's a technicality on the "cinema rights" point, but it doesn't feel like the Oilers would have the nationwide appeal of viewing parties in every major city.

We do that for massive Olympic events. The FIFA World Cup. And yes the Raptors and Toronto Blue Jays, because they are the only professional teams based in Canada in their respective sports.

But if there are massive outdoor viewing parties planned for Oilers games in Ottawa, Winnipeg and Toronto this month, I certainly haven't heard of them.

So to our American friends who think we're obsessed with getting our trophy back, please know that we haven't put the country on pause waiting to see if the Oilers bring home the title. Not everybody on this side of the border is on pins and needles. We're not like England waiting for a FIFA World Cup.

The only time we're all definitively pulling on the same rope is when we're cheering for Team Canada in national competitions. The Olympics matter to us and on that front, this country has accomplished a lot since 1992. A trio of Olympic gold medals on the men's side is a pretty nice consolation prize during a prolonged Stanley Cup drought.

(And we're not pointing any fingers, but we do know of a certain country to our south that hasn't won a gold medal on the men's side since 1980. Forty-four years is a pretty good drought too, FYI.)

An Oilers championship — while erasing a 31-year drought for a Canadian-based team — does nothing for any other fan base in this country. Cities like Ottawa, Vancouver and Winnipeg, who have never hoisted a Stanley Cup, don't receive partial credit for an Oilers championship. And if anything, an Edmonton Stanley Cup championship will only further enrage Toronto fans, who are closing in on six decades without a title.

But if there is one reason we should be collectively pulling in Canada for an Oilers Stanley Cup this month, it would be to end this ridiculous notion that we're all waiting for the Stanley Cup to come home.

And maybe if the Oilers win a Stanley Cup in June, we can put this whole "Canada's team" narrative to bed once and for all.

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