A Study of NHL Fandom Formation in Red Deer, Alberta

Blair Cipywnyk, Brock University
Craig Hyatt, Brock University

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Over the last generation, sport consumer behavior researchers have found many reasons why a sports fan would start cheering for one team over another. One of the most typical antecedents to team fandom is geographic proximity, where fans commonly cheer for the closest team. However, in the case of a city located half-way between two teams in the same league, how would the locals come to choose one over the other?

Red Deer, Alberta is exactly 84 miles (135.2 km) north of Calgary and 84 miles south of Edmonton. In order to understand how Red Deer residents came to cheer for either the NHL’s Calgary Flames or Edmonton Oilers, six Flames fans and six Oilers fans from Red Deer were interviewed one-on-one and face-to-face. Open-ended questions in the interpretive tradition were asked each fan to ascertain how they became the fans that they are. Analyzing their stories revealed four themes explaining the formation of their team loyalties. Many stated they were socialized into either Flames or Oilers fandom by family members, while others listed either team’s past successes as providing an initial attraction- two common antecedents found in existing sport consumer behavior research (Wann & James, 2019). A third antecedent was termed “rebelliousness” in that some Flames fans originally started cheering for Calgary because they perceived the Oilers at the time to be wildly successful and very popular, so they were drawn to the Flames’ underdog status. Possibly the most interesting antecedent found was that of place attachment (Laverie & Arnett, 2000).

Delia and James (2018), and Aden and Titsworth (2012) investigated cases where fan loyalty to a specific team is rooted in how that team is connected to and represents a certain geographic area. This place attachment is the idea of someone supporting a team because of a connection felt with the city, region, or community the team plays out of. However, in both aforementioned cases, the fans’ place attachment was to the place where they live or had grown-up. With Red Deer, however, five fans stated positive associations with either the city of Calgary or city of Edmonton that lead to an attraction to the Flames or Oilers, even though none of the interviewees had ever lived in either city. In three of the five cases, fans noted an attraction to the image of the city (ex., blue-collar Edmonton versus country-and-western Calgary), and in two cases, pre-existing CFL fandom for either the Calgary Stampeders or Edmonton Eskimos led to positive associations with that city, opening the door to subsequent fandom for that city’s hockey team.

This finding makes a contribution to the sport consumer behavior body of knowledge by uncoupling the (either current or former) residency requirement for the construct of place attachment. Similar to how tourism scholars can better understand the demand for vacations in various locales when destination image is considered (Kavaratzis, 2004; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011) sport managers should recognize how place attachment can influence team selection amongst both local and non-local fans.