

RINK RITUAL

Launching a Team

BY PETER B. ORLIK

ONE OBVIOUS ASPECT OF RITUAL,” asserts theology professor Tom Driver, “is that it not only brings people together in physical assembly but also tends to unite them emotionally.” (Driver 152) However, whether in houses of worship or arenas of sport, this essential emotional unity is unlikely to be attained if the spectators do not share understanding of the fundamental ritual playing out before them.

To explore hockey ritual introduction and strengthening, this article focuses on the dedicatory ceremonies for two National Hockey League franchises: the Ottawa Senators in 1992 and the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim in 1993. Though both teams would play the same sport in the same league, the bedrock of Anaheim’s tradition was its parent company’s success at animated (rather than sport) spectacle. Ottawa’s heritage, in contrast, was historic achievement in the practice of the sport itself. Each franchise had a hockey ritual to project, but one that had to be reconciled with its own and its target audience’s background.

Propagating Hockey’s Ritual

In the United States, the hockey ritual historically had been taught only in the Frost Belt. During the 1970s and ’80s, commercial promoters who tried to exploit hockey outside the northern tier of states met with limited success because they were unwilling or unable to teach the sport’s ritual as an essential step in its marketing. Even when these proprietors enjoyed television ties, such as Ted Turner’s ownership of both the Atlanta Flames and superstation WTBS, mere electronic extension of the ritual proved futile when the local audience remained ignorant of its central significances.

By the 1990s, however, commercial sports proprietors were preparing to make another attempt at major league hockey expansion into the Sun Belt. Motivated by the knowledge that hockey, though still regional, was nevertheless the fourth-most-popular professional sport in

North America (Dryden 3), and with little prospect of buying into the pricey and largely developed baseball, football and basketball major leagues, these sport entrepreneurs sought to create a Sun Belt fan base. In this task, they also hoped to avoid the previous major league failures in California (Oakland Seals, Los Angeles Sharks and San Diego Mariners), Texas (Houston Aeros), Arizona (Phoenix Roadrunners) and Georgia (Atlanta Flames). Though the reasons behind the failures of each of these National Hockey League and World Hockey Association franchises varied, a common thread in each collapse was the teams’ inability, in Driver’s words, to “bring people together in physical assembly.” In other words, it was *a common failure to package and communicate the emotional power of hockey’s ritual to the potential fan base.*

A High Priest Shows the Way

The single exception to this quarter-century string of Sun Belt failures was the Los Angeles Kings which entered the NHL in 1967. In its original, garish gold-and-purple jerseys, the team was unable to generate much more than curiosity and derision during twenty years of mediocre play; it survived largely on the suffering psyches of pre-ritualized transplants from colder climes who now resided in L.A. Then, on August 9, 1988, the Kings’ new owner, Bruce McNall, took a shortcut to ritual indoctrination when he hired a stellar, photogenic, high priest of the sport named Wayne Gretzky away from the Edmonton Oilers. In one swift stroke, the Kings’ congregation was enlarged as the starstruck flocked to the Los Angeles Forum to see this miraculous practitioner, and subsequently observed and learned the ritual *through* him. “BG – Before Gretzky – most Southern California sports fans were skeptical at best about hockey. To them it was little more than a foreign and confusing sport,” observes sportswriter Rick Sadowski. “Hockey was an annoyance to them, on par with freeway gridlock, mud-

slides, brushfires and earthquakes.” (Sadowski 3)

Immediately after Gretzky’s acquisition, however, attendance at the Forum jumped an average of 3,000 people per game. Within three years, every home game was sold out. (Hackel 8) Once the curious were attracted to the physical assembly to observe this hockey evangelist, it was much easier to get them familiar with, and therefore emotionally involved in, the ritual of the game.

Another important lesson learned from the Gretzky relocation was that increased physical assembly at the arena was a necessary prelude to increased television coverage. Within four years of Gretzky’s arrival, the Kings’ broadcast and pay television exposure had dramatically increased. This was evidenced most graphically by the fact that the franchise’s television revenues more than doubled from that of the pre-Gretzky era. (Hackel 8) The Kings’ experience demonstrated that a strong physical assembly of emotionally united believers was an essential prerequisite to successful electronic extension of the ritual.

As sportswriter Stu Hackel points out, Gretzky’s execution of the ice ritual “proved hockey could succeed in warm climates. Had the Kings not flourished with Gretzky, it’s doubtful the subsequent NHL sunbelt teams would have come into existence – certainly not the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, who contributed \$25 million in indemnification fees” (Hackel 9) for moving into the Kings’ border area.

As a first-year expansion team in 1993, the Mighty Ducks would have no Gretzky-like celebrant as a short cut to building a loyal assembly. True, the namesake movie from their Disney owners had established the product name, but as a reference to a sort of “*Bad News Bears on Ice*” rather than a corps of hallowed adult professionals. And because it adjoined the Kings’ domain, their Anaheim locale meant that the allegiance of most of the area’s existing hockey faithful was already committed elsewhere. To succeed, both the transplanted hockey executives recruited to run the Mighty Ducks and their Disney bosses realized that the team’s inaugural ceremony must mold a congregation out of those unaffiliated and inquisitive individuals who showed up for that first night at the Ducks’ home arena, The Arrowhead Pond. It was imperative to quickly indoctrinate these people into the emotional magic of the hockey ritual so that they would wish to continue to be part of the physical assembly, and proselytize the sport and team among their acquaintances.

Thus, the design of the opening night ceremony was crucially important. Not only did it need to be emotionally compelling in its own right, but also had to establish the essentials of the ongoing hockey ritual in a way that promoted the sport, and the particular way that the Mighty Ducks would practice it. Ritualization in modern societies, says Eric Hobsbawn, is the process of “inventing traditions.” (Hobsbawn 4) Thus, the Mighty Ducks’ inaugural, their opening home game against the 67-year-

old Detroit Red Wings franchise, set about to invent an Anaheim hockey tradition within the confines of a single evening. The Ducks would not have a Gretzky to draw the faithful to every game; they had to showcase a different set of recurring ritual gratifications.

The Mighty Ducks Inaugural – October 8, 1993

The most powerful rituals possess a *mystique*. As Robert Smith describes it, this mystique is a belief that the ritual event “brings about changes not to be explained by simple logic.” (Smith 21) Clergy engage in continuous struggle to energize their congregations; not just to sit passively through the ritual service, but to actively participate because they *believe* this participation will change them for the better. Entertainment packagers try to evoke a similar mystique for their stars or shows by developing in the potential audience a belief that the experience of watching this performance will leave an invigorating afterglow that somehow will enrich attendees’ lives.

As a short-cut to the attainment of mystique, the Disney organization began the Mighty Ducks’ inaugural ceremony, not with an unfamiliar hockey element, but with an Ice Capades-style review to the strains of *Be Our Guest*, a hit song from Disney’s animated blockbuster *Beauty and the Beast*. The segment was skated by helmeted men dressed in body-fitting jumpsuits in the Ducks’ primary colours of purple and teal. They were accompanied by the “Decoys,” multicultural female skaters in Playboy Bunny-like silver, teal and purple outfits complete with shiny little duck tails. All waved large, yellow circles over their heads to emphasize the excitement of ice-borne patterns in motion. Blaring over The Pond’s sound system, the words to *Be Our Guest* had been changed to end with the aggressive promise:

*We’re going to blaze some trails
Score goals
And kick some tail
Be our guest, etc.*

One rationale for the “tail kicking” line is found in Driver’s observation that, in community rituals, “the stimulation of energies hostile to an adversary is often accompanied by a rise of feelings of friendship toward members of one’s own performance group.” (Driver 155) Thus, the mystique of a Disney animated movie became a platform for the lyric of sport in order to provide the foundation for audience solidarity with the Ducks.

Suddenly, the arena darkened. From the tunnel emerged the Ducks’ Zamboni, the body of which had been designed to resemble a slanted-bow spaceship, complete with UFO-like flashing lights around its base. As the arena illumination returned, the audience could see the large Mighty Duck goalie-mask crest on the Zamboni’s deck. Meanwhile, the stentorian voice of the public address announcer introduced the main celebrant with the words:

borrowed years before from *Rock and Roll (Part Two)* by Gary Glitter. He thus sought to teach them a traditional hockey incantation while investing it, from the very beginning, with a uniquely Ducks kazoo orchestration.

But the Iceman's stridency soon became a ritual distraction. Perhaps it was because this techno-rocker was neither a mystique-rich symbol for Disney nor for hockey. Perhaps it was because he was obviously not even a minor rock star. Whatever the reason, the congregation began to boo the Iceman more and more loudly as his irrelevancy to the emerging ritual became more and more obvious. His screamed instruction: "Are you ready to meet your mascot? Break out your duck calls and blow with all your might!" came not a moment too soon for the increasingly alienated assembly. After two more attempts to increase their duck call response, which only resulted in more boos, the Iceman summoned the ceremony's real god and got out of the way.

To the accompaniment of a huge audio explosion the arena once again went dark. Suddenly the powerfully ominous strains of the Latin chorus from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* filled The Pond to signal a more worshipful phase in the ritual's unveiling. As the spotlight played upward, a large, fully-costumed Mighty Duck figure descended from the rafters on wire rigging. During his *deus ex machina* entrance, the red eyes of the huge Duck mask that also hung overhead flashed menacingly as Orff's 13th-century Latin lyrics reached a climactic crescendo. The music concluded just as the Mighty Duck landed on the illuminated faceoff circle at centre ice and a flash of sparks flew up from the pyrotechnic wands at the edge of the rink. This entire sequence parallels Driver's conviction that "Rituals invoke the participation of spirits, animals, deceased ancestors or gods, not simply as *objects* of ritual attention but as performers in their own right." (Driver 191) The Mighty Duck, later to become known as "Wild Wing," was now positioned as both animal and god, as overarching team spirit as well as performing team mascot.

As the Duck was unhitched from his harness by two male acolyte skaters, the vestal virgin Decoys surrounded him waving silver pom-poms. He then began to skate around the rink gesturing excitedly and defiantly as his team's anthem blared from the sound system:

*Fire in their eyes, you'll see them
Challenging the odds, they'll beat them
Towering surprise, unleash it
Danger on the ice, beseech it.
The Migh-tee Ducks of Anaheim
(Rock The Pond)
A surge of force that never dies
(Rock The Pond)
The Migh-tee Ducks of Anaheim!*

Stu Grimson, "The Grim Reaper," was an early fan favourite in Anaheim.

*From the depths of The Pond
The mighty Iceman cometh!*

From within the Zamboni, the vessel that prepares and renews the sanctuary within which the hockey ritual takes place, the Iceman emerged. His vestments consisted of silver overalls over a black sweater, a silver coat, a red bandanna and cut-off red gloves. His hair and face had been painted silver and shone out from under a black baseball cap with the Mighty Duck logo on the front and "ICEMAN" on the back. This celebrant was also equipped with a headset microphone, electric guitar, and inscrutable silver-framed sunglasses.

The Iceman climbed to the top of the Zamboni and immediately endeavored to pump up the crowd. While the strobing vehicle carried him around the rink, he encouraged the assembly to clap their hands and blow their free souvenir duck calls to the "dahhh – dump; (yeah) da-dup, da-dup, da-dahhh; da-dahhh – dump (yeah)" cadence that long-established hockey venues had

This anthem was mystique-building because, while it admits to the odds against a first-year expansion team, it articulated the belief that the Ducks would beat these odds through their eternal determination and the fire in their eyes which was replicated by the flashing red-orbed mask overhead. “Danger on the ice,” meanwhile, encapsulated the hazardous thrill encountered by hockey practitioners and vicariously experienced by those who attend their liturgy. In “unleashing” the Ducks, the audience was encouraged to ritualistically gird themselves for the hockey battle. As perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim points out, “Rituals not only express what people feel but also help them to feel the way the situation requires.” (Arnheim 68)

By this point in the inaugural, the Iceman’s irrelevancy to the ritual seemed to be felt by everyone. Though he continued to wander the ice in attempts to incite the crowd, their attention was more and more focused on their Duck god rather than this synthetic wizard who had summoned him. While “Rock The Pond” continued to flash on the video screens, the real Mighty Ducks players were introduced one by one as, shrouded in smoke, they emerged from the mouth of the arena tunnel. The last portion of the anthem was then reprised as the Decoys, their male counterparts, and youngsters representing the young Mighty Ducks of movie fame skated excitedly around the rink waving flags, pom-poms and hockey sticks. Finally, the Mighty Duck himself, now perched atop an oversized puck, pointed the end of his hockey stick skyward, and shot off a geyser of sparks from the end of it like some feather-covered Zeus unleashing a continuous bolt of lightning. Lights throughout the arena strobed and pulsated as the pyrotechnic rods at rink’s edge disgorged more streams of fireworks to conclude the inaugural ceremony.

Certainly, this dramatic performance did what it was intended to do by uniting the crowd emotionally in key stylized rudiments of the hockey ritual. It also vested faith in the Mighty Ducks team by lauding its – and by extension, the crowd’s – willingness to challenge the odds on the dangerous new battleground of the hockey rink. Inadvertently, it also united the congregation in their mutual dislike of the counterfeit high priest Iceman who was booed so lustily that, as *The Hockey News* later recalled, “he was banished from the Anaheim Arena for good.” (“Odd Man” S-5)

Launched by this successful ritual indoctrination, the Mighty Ducks went on in their first year to sell out 27 of 41 home games and played to an average 98.9% capacity at The Pond. (“Will Sequel” 67) This was almost 17,000 fans per game, while the Los Angeles Kings average for the same season was only 15,600! (“National Hockey League” 171)

The Ottawa Senators Inaugural – October 8, 1992

The Mighty Ducks’ inaugural took place exactly one year after the inaugural of the new Ottawa Senators. However,

the contrast between these two ritual initiations is striking. While both celebrations were conducted to launch an NHL franchise, the Senators’ ceremony took place not in still-alien southern California, but in the capital city of hockey’s homeland. For the Senators, it was not a matter of *introducing* a ritual but rather, the need to persuasively *reaffirm* and *rededicate* it.

Unlike the Disneyesque merrymaking choreographed in Anaheim, the Ottawa inaugural, from its very first moments, was clothed in the ritual trappings of an affair of state appropriate for a capital city. The Senators represented not a new and somewhat foreign entertainment, but rather the restoration of a national treasure. The Ducks were the offspring of a Hollywood movie that itself was less than two years old. The Senators, in contrast, were the heirs of a proud franchise tradition that went back to the turn of the century and achieved nine Stanley Cups before the club’s relocation and bankruptcy in the 1930s.

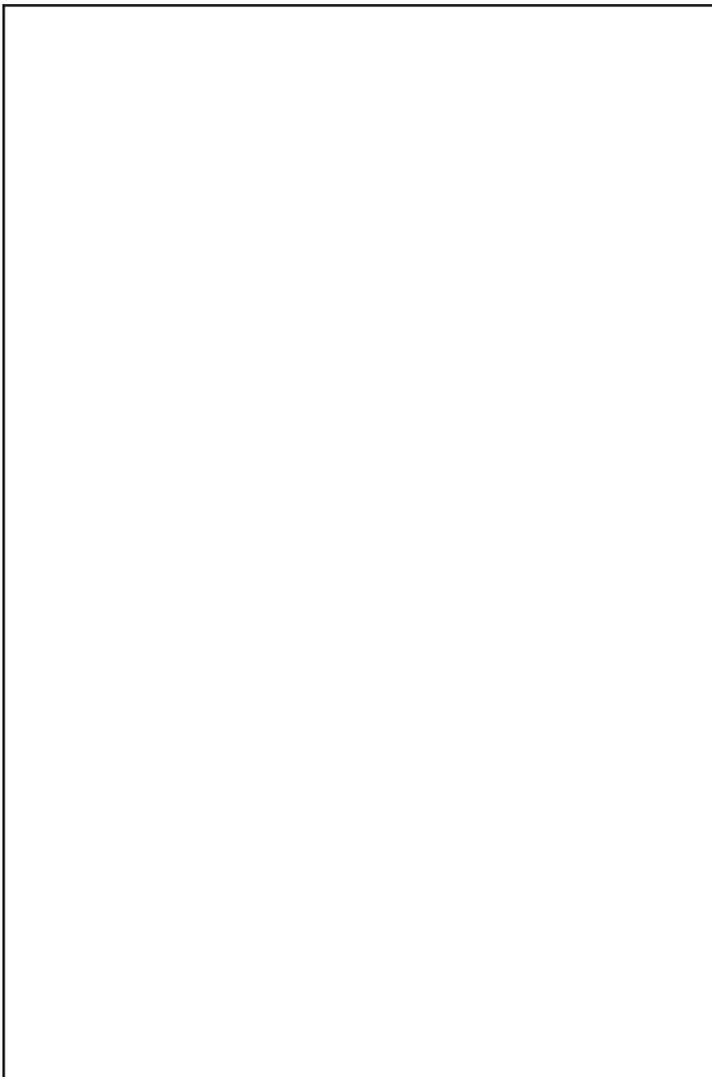
Thus, instead of opening with an extravagant production number, the Ottawa ritual began in a darkened rink as the Civic Centre’s public address announcer intoned:

Strength and dedication to their community: these qualities were shared by the original Roman Senators. And they will be reflected by the Ottawa Senators hockey club.

The heritage of the franchise was thereby subsumed in an even more legendary and ancient motif that seemed to invest what was to follow with enlarged historical significance.

A spotlight then illuminated a single costumed skater representing a herald trumpeter, dressed in the costume of the team-logo Roman centurion. The logo itself was reproduced on the banner that hung prominently from his instrument which he lifted to emit a short, stirring fanfare conceived expressly for the Senators. His musical statement was answered in antiphonal brass style by other trumpets seemingly off stage, but prerecorded just as the trumpeter’s song had been. This statement was then enlarged in a tympani-punctuated Olympic-style cadence as Doric columns, bathed in regal purple and red, descended from the ceiling to ice-level to make the rink into a surrogate forum. Spotlights played on the still-darkened ice and then all was quiet.

The antiphonal brass call and response was now repeated as the announcer interwove modern hockey and ancient history with the single line: “Let the games begin!” A recorded chorus then proclaimed the team’s simple mantra: “Let’s go, SEN-ah-tors.” No need for extended song lyrics to sell the ritual in Ottawa. The congregation here was thoroughly familiar with the hockey spectacle, and required only a basic chant to position their resurrected team within it. Four male centurion skaters in the logo character’s glittering gold breastplates and with shiny shields strapped to their arms now



Brad Marsh played his 15th and final NHL season as a member of the expansion Ottawa Senators.

began a spirited routine among the columns. They were joined by a larger number of female skaters wearing crested white caps, tunics, and armour-like gold skirts. Instead of shields, white scarves were wrapped on their arms in order to accentuate their flowing movements. The women carried double pennants mounted on poles to further emphasize the aura of classic pageantry.

Both the Senators and the Ducks thus used a corps of costumed male and female skaters as ritual acolytes. But whereas the Anaheim group was employed as no more than mobile stage-dressing for the main celebrants, the Ottawa ensemble demonstrated they were significant ice stars in their own right. At this point in the Senators' inaugural, for instance, the four male centurions separately executed an intricate skating maneuver which brought them together at centre ice to help lead the "Let's go, SEN-ah-tors!" chorus. Then the entire ensemble was showcased in a complex, synchronized, pinwheel-featuring routine as multiple laser bolts leapfrogged around them. Clearly, genuine skating excellence was exhibited

and expected as part of the Canadian enactment of the ritual. In Ottawa, ice was a native habitat and the skating virtuosity of even its minor celebrants emphasized their congregation's familiarity with it. In Anaheim, ice was a synthetic new world in which it was ceremony enough that the supporting cast was able to traverse and circle its surface as competent assistant celebrants.

Similarly, the Ottawa inaugural now introduced not a techno-bot invention (the Iceman) astride a neon conveyance, but an authentic hero propelled only by his own award-winning dexterity. Speeding to centre ice was Canadian and World Champion skater, Brian Orser. The music stopped, and Orser stood with arms in upraised homage to the assembly as the public address announcer introduced him in both English and French. The crowd's applause returned this salute and Orser then launched into an extended and riveting routine choreographed to a music bed that interwove a synthesized rock beat with romantic piano and string orchestral sequences as well as the Senators' previously unveiled trumpet fanfare. As the ensemble skaters stood at attention near the Doric columns, Orser ended his world-class routine with a spectacular racing backflip. This brought prolonged, spontaneous applause from the audience. Their familiarity with on-ice ritualistic elements, and their appreciation of excellence in element execution, needed no instructive cheerleading from any on- or off-ice presence.

The Ottawa Senators team was now introduced. Again, all announcements were made in both French and English with frequent alternation as to which language was first employed. This liturgical practice was essential not only to reinforce the Canadian capital city's respect for bilingualism, but in recognition that the Province of Quebec lies just across the Ottawa River as an important additional source of Senators supporters. Simultaneously, the rite had the secondary effect of further reinforcing the sense of civic protocol that surrounded this inaugural event.

The team introduction was accomplished without the elaborate smoke and musical incitement that the Mighty Ducks employed. Unlike the crowd in Anaheim, the Ottawa congregation was not only familiar with most of these players, but also with the roles each performed in the hockey liturgy.

Once the entire team and coaching staff had been introduced, they stood alone, half the squad on each blue line, as the congregation cheered. Spotlights crisscrossed the ice, but unlike the Anaheim ceremony, no musical theme or costumed character was necessary to incite fans who had participated in this type of ritual so many times before. To further reinforce the orthodoxy of the Senators, the announcer then proclaimed:

Ladies and gentlemen, Ottawa has produced nine Stanley Cup-winning teams. The Senators honour their heritage by unveiling nine com-

memorative banners.

The ensemble skaters now joined the team, fronting their ranks on each of the blue lines. As each Cup-winning year was announced (1903, 1904, 1905, 1909, 1911, 1920, 1921, 1923 and 1927), a logo banner emblazoned with that year unfurled from a lowered girder over the blue line; the flag's bottom edge immediately steadied by one of the ensemble skaters. This incantation continued until four banners were displayed over one blue line and five over the other.

The historical legitimacy of the franchise was reinforced even more as the announcer recalled the memory of Frank Finnigan: "A man who scored a goal in the Senators' last Stanley Cup-winning game. And a man who helped bring back the Ottawa Senators." A Finnigan teammate, Ray Kinsella, was then introduced. Frank Finnigan's son, Frank Jr., and team chairman Bruce Firestone escorted the frail Mr. Kinsella down a red carpet that had been laid on the ice. Firestone thanked the congregation "for making this incredible evening possible" and raised the arms of Kinsella and Frank Jr. in a celebratory gesture that symbolically united the Senators' old heroic spirits with its new expansion players. The chairman recalled how Finnigan Sr. had scored that significant goal in 1927, "the last year *we* won the cup." This first-person reference served to further commingle the Senators' past and present.

Firestone then moved to solidify this loyalty by calling on his two companions to "retire forever" Frank Finnigan's #8 jersey. Frank Jr. pulled a cord, and another banner, this one replicating a #8 jersey, unfurled next to the 1927 Stanley Cup banner and in front of the three men. As the trio retired, the ten banners, symbolic of Finnigan's jersey and nine Stanley Cup championships were then raised to the rafters to the strains of Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. Not only did this action extend the loyalty-building dynamic of the ceremony, it also stood in marked contrast to the counterpart portion of the Anaheim inaugural. Rather than a fledgling and obviously fictitious god *descending* to found a new assembly, Ottawa's ceremony featured the ten relics of authentic past glories *ascending* into the heavens to reunite a venerable congregation that had been scattered for nearly sixty years. With the elevation of these flags, the resurrection of the Senators was physically and ritualistically complete.

A Ritual Recapitulation

Both the Mighty Ducks' and the Senators' inaugurals convincingly celebrated the hockey ritual. Yet, neither would have succeeded in the other's cultural venue due to the differences in their respective congregations' ritual expectations and understanding of the hockey rite's intricacies. The only bedrock of Anaheim's tradition was its parent company's success at animated spectacle. Ottawa's heritage, in contrast, was historic achievement

in the practice of the fundamental ritual itself. A celebration of hockey alone would have been uninspiring to the curious neophytes in Anaheim. A glossy spectacle that slighted hockey's ancestry would have been blasphemous to the orthodox disciples in Ottawa.

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