

“IT’S REAL IN THAT THEY MAKE IT REAL BUT IT’S NOT ACTUALLY REAL, TANGIBLE”: HOCKEY IN RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Dominique Falls, BSC, MA, PHD (ABD)

Faculty, Douglas College, Sport Science

PhD Candidate, Simon Fraser University, Sociology & Anthropology



TODAY'S PRESENTATION

- **Assumption that hockey 'belongs' in and to rural and small-town Canada.**
 - Where does this come from?
 - Was it ever the case? Is this still the case?
 - Who does it belong to? (Adams, 2006; Dyck, 2012; Wilson, 2006)
- **Where do we stand today?**
 - Fewer players and decreased 'visibility'
 - Hockey still kept alive through everyday actions and narratives of *some* residents in the region.
- **Conclusion**
 - A lot of people playing and watching hockey in these communities.
 - Certain people ('Lifers')
 - Too much diversity in the way hockey is being lived and experienced to suggest it still (or ever did) 'belong' to small towns.
 - Small towns are too diverse, within and between.
 - 'Making hockey real' is taking away from the reality of youth sport in the region – diversity.



THE PROJECT

Ethnographic research project (2012-2015)

- Rural and Small-town Regions (RSTs), childhood, sports
- Observations and rich qualitative interview data
 - 100 children, parents, and sport and youth administrators.
- *Major Question:* How are young people, parents, and sports administrators' experiences in organized youth sport influenced by growing up and living in rural/small town communities?



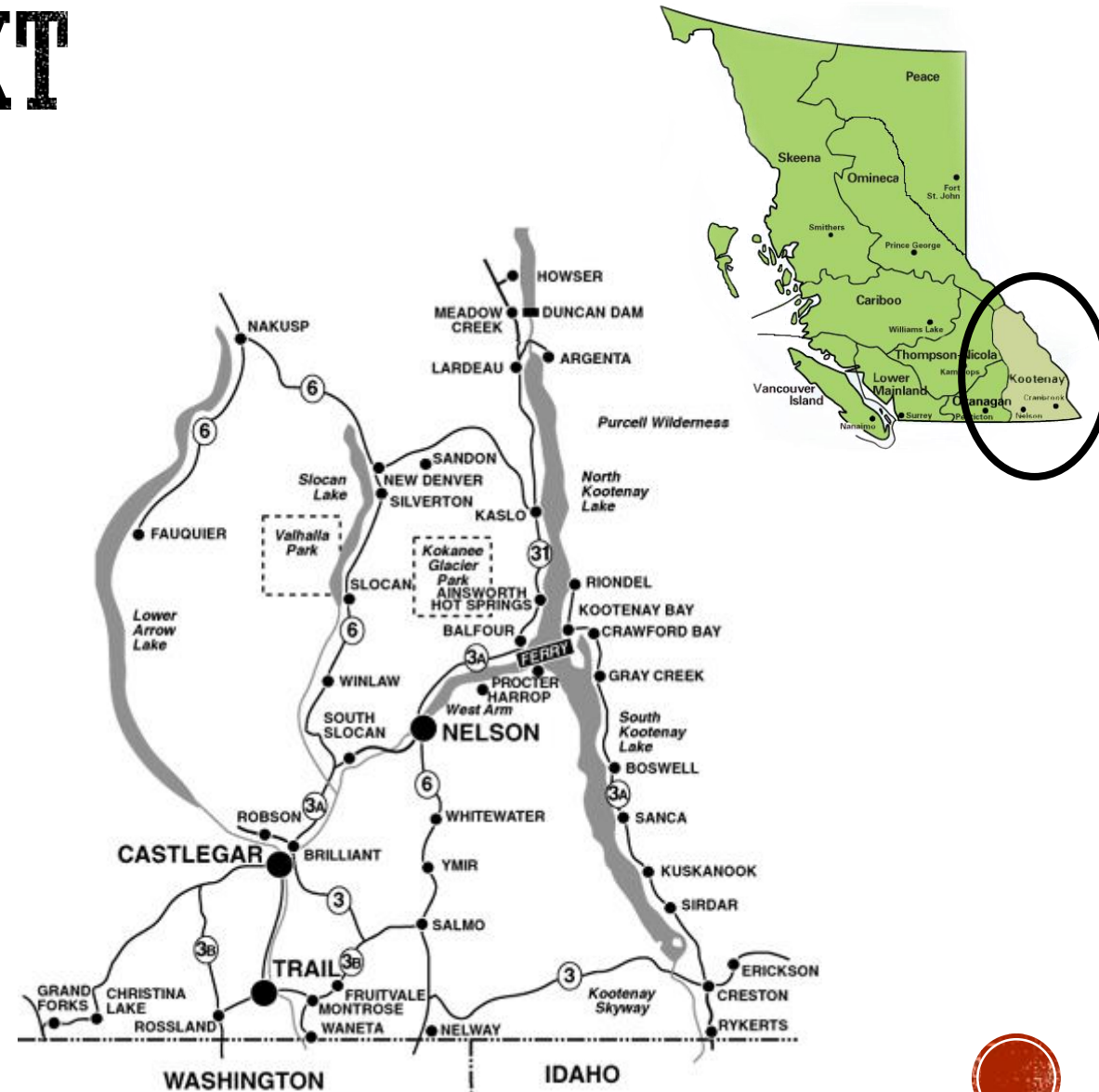
THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Sport

- Trail BC's #1 Sports Town (2005)
- "Home of the Champions"
- Nelson Leafs & Notre Dame University
- Nancy Greene, Jason Bay
- Mountain Biking, Hiking

Socio-Cultural History

- Resource Extraction (Gordon, 2004; Moir, 2011)
 - Rail (CPR) (Gordon, 2004; Lang, 2003)
 - CM&S (Teck) (Larsen, 2010; Mouat, 1995)
- Italian Immigration (Bowen, 2011)
- Doukhobors (Cran, 2006)
- Japanese Internment (Daroshin, 1995)
- Draft Dodgers (Rodgers, 2014)



West Kootenays of British Columbia

AND THEN THERE WAS HOCKEY...

- **Infrastructure**
- **Sports Museum** (2014)
- **Significant Events**
 - Referendums (2000,2010)
 - Winning teams (2013)
 - Amalgamation (2014)
- **Narratives**
 - 'You must be here for the hockey'?
 - 'This is a hockey town'



*Why do people think researching sports in an RST region means I must be researching hockey?
What role does hockey play here? Are these “hockey towns”? What makes a “hockey town”?*



REAL PEOPLE, TALKING ABOUT 'REAL' HOCKEY (?)

- What did the kids tell me about hockey in their lives? In the community?
- What did the adults tell me about hockey in their lives? In the community?
- What did I observe around me? Infrastructure? Participation?
- What did I hear around me? Read?

*"It's great that your background is not hockey, because otherwise it would be easy for somebody to just talk about hockey, because they would but the blinders on."
(Parent and Sport Administrator, Trail)*



SMALL-TOWN, HOCKEY TOWN(S)?

- **Importance of small-town hockey in 'Canadian Identity' → "Hockey's story"**
- **Late 19th century: "Urban"** (Decosse, 2015, p.21)
- **Early 20th century: More accessible**
 - Rink as centre of community – social event
- **Link to:**
 - Environment, weather (Adams, 2006; Dyck, 2009; Whitson & Gruneau, 1993)
 - Character that 'built these towns'
 - Working-class, labour jobs (Tremonti, 2016; Campbell & Parcels, 2013)
 - Company towns (Decosse, 2015; Larson, 2010; Szilagyi, 2015) – "Industrial recreation" (Anderson, 1995)
- **But, what about now?**



IT *WAS* REAL, TANGIBLE... FOR SOME

- **Elite player production was in Kootenays (Decosse, 2015)**

- 1951, 7.5% of population, 21.3% of the elite players.
- 1912-1960, 53% of senior pro. championships, 74% of JR. pro. champs, 71% of Min. Champs, 2 World Champs(p.54)
- 22% of all BC born NHL players form 1940-1979 (p.56)
- 12.6% of players drafted to WHL (1992-2002) (p.53)

- **Infrastructure**

- One of BC's first minor hockey programs
- 1926: Largest art. rink between Winnipeg and Vancouver
- 42% of operational ice rinks in 1960 (Atwell, 1988)
- League structures

- **Socio-Economic**

- Employment in mining double from 1951-1981.
- CM & S
- Forestry, damn construction

- **Social cultural**

- "What we did on Friday nights"

- Gender, race-based (Adams, 2006; Larsen, 2010; Whitson & Gruneau, 1993)
- City-based, not regional



IT WAS A “CULTURAL THING”

*There's a reason that the Kootenays at one time [...] generated a disproportion into the amount of elite hockey players. And I think the reason is because of Cominco. And Cominco had teams that they were -- you know, the guy worked at Cominco, but he was there to play hockey [...] And so then **when those guys had kids, those kids grew up, all they knew was hockey.** And who came out of that? You've got the NHL player like Steve Tambolini and Zanier and -- Pat Price from Nelson...And the reason is they were all kids at the time of the Western Hockey League or kids of players who played in it. So Trail had a real core of hockey talent. But it was really their offspring that all kind of went to the NHL and higher-level hockey. ...and stuff like that. There was a whole bunch of them. **But it wasn't a fluke.** It was because [...] you had a whole bunch of guys who came together -- with some huge funding...So anyway, that's my take on why it was that way, and these kids grew up, my age, who are now in their 50s, they grew up going every Friday and Saturday night to these high-level hockey games, really, really good hockey, because there were only six or 12 teams in the NHL, so everything filters down. **And they just grew up with it. So it was a cultural thing. That's not there anymore.** (Parent, Christina Lake)*



WHAT ABOUT NOW? IS IT REAL?

*We were driving back from a basketball tournament and arrived in time for dinner. As we were driving into town, I noticed that the local team was playing. None of the boys mentioned that there were hockey games tonight even though all the teams were in action (communities from which the players are from) and it was a Saturday night. **Was I expecting the boys to want to get home so they could go to the game? Was I expecting that the boys would want to go cheer on the home team? I didn't see a single one of them at the game.** (Fieldnotes, 02 14 15, Trail)*

***That's just what people do.** So it's kind of like the sport to play. And it's part of the Canadian culture, that's like you hear about it on TV and stuff. All the time. Like the NHL. It's probably most of it.” (Boy, high school, Castlegar)*



IT IS NOT REAL, TANGIBLE...FOR SOME

Suburbanization of elite athlete production (Decosse, 2015, p.21)

- Substantial decrease in players and teams
- 4.1% of population, and 7.2% of elite hockey players.
- 3.2% of players drafted to WHL (2003-2014) (p.53)
- Too expensive, time consuming
- Lack of local players

Infrastructure

- Changing league structures
- Amalgamation

- Referendums

Socio-Economic

- BC mining employment dropped 50% 1980-1999 (Young, 2008)
- Contingent work (Winson and Leach, 2002)

Socio-Cultural

- Not 'a must'
- Other things to do on Friday Nights
- "I don't know why"

*I asked the door person where I should sit if I wanted to cheer for the home team [The Smokies]. He basically looked at me a little funny and then **I realized when walking in that there were so few people that it wouldn't really matter.***

(Fieldnotes, 02 14 15, Trail)



TENSIONS

I think right now, I don't think hockey is as much of a 'must' as it was before for kids, and a lot of kids, well, there are so many different opportunities, choices for kids. There isn't as much pressure in saying, "Well, if you're a boy, you need to play hockey because that's Canada's game, and it's a small-town thing, and everybody's at the rink. I don't think that's the case anymore." (Parent and Sport Administrator, Castlegar)

That's the one thing I find most off that you can't find just, an open gym where you can play volleyball, or tennis inside or badminton. But every city from here to the coast you'll find a hockey rink...Even Cold Lake has three arenas I think. They were building a new one as we were leaving. I just find it odd because the year we moved in was the last year for the Middle School. It was odd that suddenly there's no government funding for a school, but there's still enough for two arenas within 20 minutes of each other? Now in Trail, it's like the ice is smooth enough but they still fix it. Nobody's listening. They'll put the money towards someone polishing the two hockey Cups. (High school, Fruitvale)



IT IS MADE REAL, BY SOME

Participation

- 4 Junior Teams, 1 Major Midget Girls
- College Team

Infrastructure

- Rinks and/or programs in all communities over 1,000
- Continued public investment
- Walk of Champions Monuments
- Museum – Nelson

Socio-Economic

- Teck support

Socio-Cultural

- Common narrative
 - #1 Sports Town (2005)
 - Newspaper coverage
 - Canada's game
- Generational, community support
- Social Status

In Nakusp, if you weren't a hockey player, you weren't in the in-crowd.
(Young girl, recently graduated, Nakusp)

Because all of the kids from Trail at my school, like 90% of them are all just, like, hockey jocks, and all they do is talk about hockey (Young boy, high school, Fruitvale)

It's like our community revolves around hockey. Like more people think that's the number one sport and that should come first before the other sports. [What gives you that sense?] Even more money is put into hockey things. (Young girl, high school, Fruitvale)



TENSIONS

*The word I'm looking for, educational metaphors pointed towards hockey, like physics, the hockey puck slides down the ice with an index of friction of .25 Newtons, and there's nothing -there's no bowling metaphors for learning. **There's lots of hockey put into learning, because they feel like everyone can learn from hockey.** It's mostly through math and physics as you get closer to the senior years, where they use hockey pucks and sticks as references towards locomotion, speed, and accelerate... **The two things I think about physics, are cars driving off cliffs and then hockey questions** (High school, Trail).*

*The fact that politically those people that are in those political positions, guess where they grew up? Here. Guess what they grew up in? Hockey. So to them, hockey is still culturally something you do not touch. So it's still given that pedestal despite the fact if you were to look for the bang for your buck, it's not what it was. **Those seat at 90% empty most of the time.** All of that infrastructure, all of that space that requires all of that servicing does nothing -- does nothing to make a community healthier or anything like that. **So all of those decisions are still based on past events, not events that are happening right now.** So based upon the fact that now 40 years ago the arena used to be full. So not only did you have 25 games of a junior team, you had 25 games or even more of a senior team. So you had a lot. **What happens is you live in mythology. We are living in the past.** (Recreation and Sport Administrator, Nelson)*



SOME CONCLUSIONS

- **Community support is related to the size of the community.**
 - E.G. Too small and there just isn't a hockey arena. Too big and there are too many things to do other than hockey.
- **Community support is related to history of specific community.**
 - E.G. Trail versus Nelson
- **Community support is related to economic prospects of community**
 - E.G. Trail versus Nelson
- **Community support is related to demographic composition of community**
 - E.G. 'Lifers', 'anti-establishment' types
- **Community support is related to participation in the sport**
 - E.G. Hockey for hockey people



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Which rural and small-towns are we talking about?
- What about Indigenous communities?
- What will change when the generations 'turn over'?
- What happens to rural and small town hockey programs in an era when talent is 'manufactured', rather than nurtured?
- What happens to rural and small town hockey programs in an era when 'company towns' are disappearing?



THANKS! MERCI!



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