

Lords of the Rinks: The Emergence of the National Hockey League, 1875–1936. By *John Chi-Kit Wong*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. viii + 235 pp. Index, notes, appendix, photographs. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$32.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-802-03725-9; paper, 0-802-08520-2.

Reviewed by Steven A. Riess

Lords of the Rinks deftly examines the professional origins of Canada's national sport and the rise of the National Hockey League. Canadian commercialized sports, like their American counterparts, were influenced by technological innovations and industrialization, but there are important differences in how they emerged in each country, reflecting Canada's British heritage, population dispersal, and slower rate of urbanization.

John Wong, assistant professor of sport management at Washington State University, began this study of the NHL's transformation into a business organization as his dissertation, but he soon realized the need to examine the League's roots in commercialized elite amateur hockey before he could take up the topic of the NHL's development from regional Canadian enterprise into a North American sports cartel. Wong writes mainly about the people who turned hockey into a professional, commercial enterprise and developed a network that included players, club directors, and owners, as well the media, rival organizations, rink owners, fans, and governments with a stake in the sport's development. Thus, the book exceeds the range covered by traditional business studies of sports, which tend to be more concerned with player–management relations.

The narrative starts with the formalizing of hockey under amateur ideals in the late nineteenth century and traces the gradual incursion of commercial interests into the game, even among amateur associations; the reasons for the split between amateurs and professionals; and the difficult ascent to the status of league before finally achieving stability in the 1930s.

The first recorded modern hockey game was played in 1875 at Montreal's Victoria Skating Rink. Each team had nine players, and the rink had no sideboards to separate players from spectators. Two years later, James Creighton published the first set of rules for what was still an upper-class sport. Eventually it displaced snowshoeing and skating in the 1880s, as reflected in the formation in 1887 of the Amateur Hockey Association of Canada. Within a few years, hockey became popular among student-dominated French and Irish-Canadian clubs, and the sport soon took on powerful symbolic importance for these and other communities.

Early senior clubs relied on membership dues and gate receipts for revenue, which led to a greater emphasis on winning and forced them to recruit and pay skilled players. In 1898 the top clubs formed the Canadian Amateur Hockey League (CAHL), which developed a formal organizational structure, a code of behavior, and mechanisms to monitor members, steps that set it on its course toward professionalization. Wong conceives of professionalization as a process that moved the sport from its original class-based exclusionism to a preoccupation with finding talented players and expanding profit margins.

A confusing array of leagues came and went over the next few years, including the short-lived, overtly professional International Hockey League formed in 1904. The CAHL and its successors tried to monopolize the pool of gifted Montreal players, which contributed to the conflict between Canadian amateurism and professionalism known as Athletic War of 1906–09. In 1909 the professional Canadian Hockey Association and the National Hockey Association were created. The NHA campaigned to remove the stigma attached to professional sports, and it drew up a constitution containing reserve and waiver clauses to bind players and control costs. In the West, the Pacific Canadian Hockey Association was established to exploit an untapped market, and it competed with the NHA for players until 1913, when the two organizations agreed to respect each other's reserve clauses. They also agreed to make the competition for the Stanley Cup, which was the oldest team-sport trophy in North America, an annual contest between their leagues. In 1917 the NHA shut down its business, purely to free itself of Edward Livingstone, the troublesome owner of the Toronto Shamrocks, and reconstituted itself as the National Hockey League. The NHL's most important step was consolidating power in

the hands of its president, Frank Calder. Wong claims that by 1921 the NHL had become established as a small but profitable business, even though it only made \$1,100 that year. From 1923 to 1928 the NHL grew from four to ten teams, including several U.S. teams that only wealthy men could afford to operate, since they were more expensive to run than the Canadian teams.

Wong is interested in the relations among the sport's stakeholders, who had different interests and values and competed intensely for control of the sport as it became more successful. Thus he carefully scrutinizes the changes that took place in the administrative structures of governing bodies as the hockey network went through periods of expansion and contraction.

Originally a loose relationship existed between the providers of capital and the producers of labor. Sometimes people performed both functions. Although the club was organized as a hierarchy, management and members maintained a fraternal connection. The players might have had some say in making policy, but they did not share in the profits. As the commercialized sports world became more differentiated, elite amateur and professional sports organizations became more centralized, specialized, and bureaucratized, and the distinction between owners (capitalists) and labor (players) intensified.

The creation of a corporate culture often led to contests over terrain. Members tried to alter or defend regulations and performance standards and define appropriate behavior in order to consolidate, maintain, and demarcate their spheres of influence. These power struggles often caused problems for young organizations that were trying to create their own identities and corporate cultures.

This book is based on first-rate research in the NHL archives, where Wong examined minutes of meetings, letters, memos, telegrams, gate-receipt reports, and other documents. It is an excellent study of the origins of a professional sports league that was about fifty years behind baseball.

Steven A. Riess is professor of history at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago. He has written and edited several books on American sports history, including City Games:

American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports (1989) and Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era (1999, revised edition).