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Author

Björk, Ulf Jonas

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SPECIAL FORUM

**“An NHL Touch”:
Transnationalizing Ice Hockey in
Sweden, 1994–2013**

ULF JONAS BJÖRK

For several years in the mid-2000s, the small-town ice hockey club in Leksand, Sweden, found itself the target of a trademark complaint filed by the National Hockey League club the Dallas Stars. The issue was that the Swedish team had taken to calling itself the Leksand Stars (in English), and Patentbesvärsträtten, the Swedish court charged with ruling on trademark disputes, eventually agreed with the American team that the Swedish name could potentially be associated with the trademark-protected moniker of the NHL.¹

That a professional American team would monitor a national league in a small country across the Atlantic for signs of trademark infringement was evidence of the increasingly transnational nature of ice hockey. It was a development visible on both sides of the Atlantic, beginning in the late twentieth century. In North America, the growing number of professional players from Sweden and other European nations in the National Hockey League contributed to making the game and the league less Canadian and American. In Sweden, increased interest in trans-Atlantic hockey produced substantial changes in the way the Swedish national league was marketed.

The research question of this study is how that marketing was done and how fans reacted to it. In a broader sense, the question also touches on the circumstances that lead to American influences being accepted or rejected by a recipient country. Although the study deals with developments in both North America and Sweden, it focuses on how clubs and leagues in Sweden attempted to “re-brand” the sport along North American lines in the 1990s. That effort had broad implications for Swedish hockey, showing that the influences in ice hockey flowed both ways between North America and Sweden, although the flow was asymmetrical.

Using newspaper and trade-journal accounts as well as organization records and reader comments in newspapers and blog posts as sources, this article discusses the reasons for that effort, how the changes were implemented and how the public reacted to them. In a broader perspective, the analysis places the attempt to change Swedish hockey within the framework of the increasing commercialization of ice hockey and other sports, a development pioneered in the United States. First, however, it is necessary to discuss how ice hockey became a truly global game.

Hockey Goes Global: The North American Perspective

Histories of the “globalization” of ice hockey tend to see 1972 as a pivotal year. That is when a Canadian team of National Hockey League players met the Soviet national team in the so-called Summit Series and realized that although they managed to win the eight-game series in dramatic fashion with a goal scored within the last minute of the last game, the Russian style of hockey presented a real challenge to Canada’s long-standing domination of the game. To historian Neil Earle, for instance, that meant the beginning of “the global game – our late modern/world market era of transnational globalism.”²

The result of the 1972 series is often discussed in terms of international competition, i.e., the participation of NHL professionals rather than Canadian amateurs in the Olympics and world championships. As John Soares notes, however, an equally important consequence was an influx of European players into the NHL. As the Canada-Soviet games were underway, Canadian newspapers reported that two teams in the league might be willing to pay the unprecedented sum of \$1 million to acquire Soviet star Valerii Kharlamov. Cold War politics nevertheless made it difficult to recruit players from the USSR and other Eastern bloc nations. Notably, the handful of Czechoslovak players who played in North America in the 1970s did so only after defecting to the West.³

Recruiting players from Sweden, by contrast, entailed no such problems (although, as Tobias Stark shows in his study of one of the most successful Swedish migrants to the NHL, Börje Salming, there was some resistance from the national Swedish hockey federation and from Swedish clubs⁴). Consequently, the 1970s witnessed Salming establishing himself as a major player on the Toronto Maple Leafs roster and Anders Hedberg and Ulf Nilsson playing spectacular games for the Winnipeg Jets of the World Hockey Association, the short-lived rival league of the NHL, before being recruited by the NHL’s New York Rangers. Described in a 1998 *New York Times* article as “point men” in the process of making the NHL “an international league,” Hedberg and Nilsson were credited with introducing a European-style game that stressed passing and puck handling, ultimately paving the way for Canadian players like Wayne Gretzky.⁵ The break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War meant that Russian, Czech, and Slovak players joined NHL teams in increasing numbers, leading the *Sporting News* to note in 1998 that the share of Europeans on

team rosters had risen from 6 percent in 1989-1990 to 22 percent eight years later. *Sporting News* contributor Mike Keenan, coach of the Vancouver Canucks, singled out Sweden as “a major supplier of NHL talent.”⁶

It is undeniable that European players and the style of ice hockey they brought with them turned the game into the most international of North America’s major sports and changed the way it was played. That is the aspect of the globalization of hockey that a great deal of academic research in the United States and Canada has tended to focus on.⁷

To some extent, the migration of players was a two-way flow. A couple of Canadians had played on Swedish club teams as early as 1949, but the beginnings of what the Stockholm daily *Atonbladet* called “the foreign legion” in league hockey in Sweden were triggered by the departure of Swedish stars for the NHL in the mid-1970s, which forced clubs to look beyond Sweden’s borders for talent. As league rules limited the number of North American players to two per team until 2013, most foreign players initially came from Europe, but the removal of the two-player limit led to a record number of Americans and Canadians in Swedish hockey, 45 at the start of the 2013-14 season.⁸ In both Sweden and North America, then, hockey became a more international game, particularly in the early twenty-first century.

The influences from North America on Swedish ice hockey went far beyond a mere importation of players. As ever more Swedish stars left their homeland for professional careers across the Atlantic, Swedish fans and mass media began to pay intense attention to NHL games, resulting in coverage of league games both in newspapers and on television in Sweden.

Particular proof of the increasingly international presence of the NHL was the surge in popularity of trading cards among Swedish fans, particularly younger ones. A brash new entrant into the field of sports trading cards in the United States, Upper Deck, had been the first to market hockey trading cards abroad in 1992, introducing them in Czechoslovakia; two years later, a reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen* claimed that the “kids line up 20 deep at the trading-card counters in the rinks to buy the latest Upper Deck and Leaf trading cards” in “the downtowns of Finland, Norway and Sweden.” Commenting on the same phenomenon, the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter* characterized trading cards as “a multi-billion industry that has Sweden in its grasp” because “practically every single child” in Sweden knew the name Upper Deck.⁹

While trading cards and game broadcasts increased awareness of the NHL and its Swedish-born players among Swedish hockey fans, the transactions involved in player transfers afforded Swedish clubs a view of how the North American professional league was structured and operated.¹⁰ The result was a flow of influences across the Atlantic that had a broad impact on hockey in the country that the new NHL recruits came from. As Alan Barnier notes, those influences pertained primarily to the “organization and packaging” of ice hockey in Sweden.¹¹ Inspired by the NHL, Swedish clubs and the league they belonged to started to rethink how the game was marketed and in what kind of environment it should be presented. That aspect, which has not

received a great deal of scholarly attention, is the focus of this study. Before discussing how North American influences made Swedish ice hockey more transnational, however, a short account of the sport's history in Sweden is in order.

The Import That Became a Swedish National Pastime

Ice hockey was, of course, an import from North America, having been invented in its modern form in Canada. Official histories of ice hockey in Sweden date the sport's introduction to the year 1919, when three men met in Stockholm to discuss the possibility of Swedish participation in the hockey tournament at the 1920 Olympic Games. Two of the three had obvious US ties: Raoul Le Mat was a Stockholm-based American engaged in importing films for Swedish movie theaters, while Ernest Viberg was a Swedish-American with a past in the US Navy. Le Mat and Viberg eagerly sought to persuade the third member of the group, Anton Johansson, an executive of Sweden's national football association, that a Swedish ice hockey team should be sent to the games in Antwerp. (The 1920 Olympic Games were a summer event, as winter games had not yet been introduced.) Johansson eventually agreed, and the team that was the result of the meeting acquitted itself well, finishing fourth after Canada, the United States, and Czechoslovakia.¹² (In one of the few detailed histories of the development of ice hockey as a sport in Sweden, Tobias Stark rejects the idea that Sweden's participation in ice hockey in the 1920 Olympic Games was "assembled over a cup of coffee by a handful of nimble-witted and enterprising friends of ice hockey," but he nevertheless concludes that the team sent to Antwerp came about due to the efforts of an "inner circle" at the top levels of the Swedish sports establishment, a circle that included, among others, Johansson, Le Mat and Viberg.¹³)

In the next few years, the sport gained rapidly in popularity in Sweden, which participated in the first European championship, held in 1921, and witnessed the first Swedish national championship the following year.¹⁴ Development was even more rapid in the years following World War II, leading one of the top officials of Swedish hockey to predict, in 1972, that it would soon surpass football as Sweden's most popular sport.¹⁵ While that ascendancy never came to pass, ice hockey remained broadly popular among Swedes, and by the early 1990s, it was a firmly established sport in Sweden, with 50,000 licensed players divided into almost 800 different clubs fielding close to 4,200 teams.¹⁶ In the process, as Stark argues, hockey had also become closely associated in people's minds with Swedish society, values and nationality.¹⁷

That association had been achieved, in large part, by ice hockey being structured along the lines of already established sports, with a national association, Svenska Ishockeyförbundet, tied to the umbrella organization for all sports, Riksidrottsförbundet, the Swedish Sports Confederation. The Confederation has always seen itself as representing the sports movement, which in turn was one of the many popular movements that emerged in the Nordic countries in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ These movements, characterized by education scholar Josef Fahlén as the

“third sector, between the public and the private sectors,” have traditionally been seen as intricately linked with the development of Swedish democracy and society.¹⁹ (The clear non-profit nature of the organization of ice hockey and other sports in Sweden was also, as Fahlén notes, different from the profitability-oriented and commercial American structure for sports.²⁰)

The 1990s: A Time of Change

It was thus an institution perceived as “genuinely Swedish” that executives in the highest division in Swedish ice hockey, Elitserien (the Elite League), set out to change in the mid-1990s. The move was initiated by the League’s president, Tommy Töpel, in 1993, for two major reasons: the increasing involvement of commercial television in ice hockey in Sweden, and a desire to profit from sales of merchandise. (A third possible reason, not articulated by the League, was that attendance at hockey games had been falling steadily since the late 1980s.²¹)

While television coverage had been a major factor in the development of Swedish ice hockey since the late 1950s, the introduction of commercial channels in the late 1980s entailed a major change, Fahlén argues, because it opened up the possibility of revenues from advertising and broadcasting rights.²² The leadership of Svenska Ishockeyförbundet clearly sensed that a new era was dawning, calling top officials together for a 1989 conference where the “development of the hockey product” would be discussed and where “media and marketing issues” loomed large.²³ By late 1995, the chairman of the national association set as a goal that there should be “as much TV exposure as possible,” and a year later the annual report of one of the northern districts noted that “the TV world is pumping money” into ice hockey.²⁴

TV3, one of the first commercial channels in Sweden, had acquired the rights to broadcast the world championships as early as 1989, but the most significant development for league games took place in the 1994-95 season, when TV4, by then Sweden’s premier commercial television channel, began the practice of broadcasting an entire league game live on Monday nights. That entailed what Svenska Ishockeyförbundet chairman Rickard Fagerlund termed “breaking an almost sacrosanct principle” of scheduling games in complete rounds, with every team matched up against another club.²⁵ Under the new arrangement, one game would be broken off from the Sunday round and played the following Monday night. A year later, Fagerlund claimed that the arrangement with TV4 had “largely turned out well.”²⁶

The broadcast format would change as well. Earlier, when dealing with entire rounds, broadcasts had gone from game to game as goals were scored. Now, with the focus on one game, there was concern that the games would not be entertaining enough and that viewers would be bored, a point noted both by the Stockholm newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* and by the trade journal *Hockey*.²⁷ (A 1995 meeting of Svenska Ishockeyförbundet leaders had also recommended “new activities and ideas” to generate TV coverage and, presumably, combat viewer boredom.²⁸)

To counteract such boredom, club executives sought to make the atmosphere surrounding the games more exciting. Luleå in far northern Sweden took the lead in the fall of 1994 by having its players enter the home arena through a gigantic bear's maw. That device earned the approval of a columnist in *Hockey*, who thought it "looked better on television than in real life."²⁹ Although novel in Sweden, Luleå's entrance procedure was hardly original, and its origins were not hard to discern. It was, noted a columnist for *Dagens Nyheter*, "an idea stolen outright from the NHL team San Jose Sharks"—the only difference being that the San Jose players entered the ice through a huge shark's mouth.³⁰

Within two seasons, virtually all the league's teams had followed suit, introducing elements such as smoke, fireworks, light shows, animal sounds, people dressed up as team mascots, and cheerleaders. (According to the Stockholm tabloid *Aftonbladet*, however, none of Luleå's competitors had been able to improve on that team's original idea.)³¹ The author noted several other changes along American lines when, for the first time in decades, he attended a Swedish ice hockey game in the spring of 2000, among them the singing of the national anthem—previously reserved for matches between national teams and never performed at league games—and the transformation of the ice rink announcer from an occasional neutral voice providing facts to a garrulous partisan presence exhorting fans to support the home team.

At the end of 1996, when the process of changing the trappings of games had just begun, the Stockholm tabloid *Expressen* put a series of questions to a group of people involved in various ways in hockey and basketball in Sweden. The newspaper article began with a general observation: "The influence of the United States of America is great. So great that Swedish sports have been influenced. Above all it is hockey and basketball that have become McDonaldized with cheerleaders, jingles."³² Among the questions posed to the panel, which included a former basketball player turned advertising executive, a cheerleader, and an active female basketball player, was whether the two sports in question were "so boring that they need to be packaged according to an American concept" and whether the respondents did not "miss the genuinely Swedish things—just some Swedish hit tunes and hot dogs during the breaks." Answers from panel members suggested, moreover, that the changes were made to avoid "dull moments" during games, which had turned from mere athletic contests into "events" where the audience wanted "value for its money."³³

As is evident from the tone of *Expressen's* questions, journalists themselves were skeptical of the changes. A year before the panel discussion, a columnist for the same newspaper had visited the Frölunda rink in Göteborg. Dubbing it the "stronghold of tastelessness," he had taken particular issue with two "clowns" dressed up as Indians who appeared at breaks in the game to belt out tunes, "without charm, without singing voices, without talent."³⁴

“An NHL Touch”

The singing Indians who so dismayed *Expressen*'s reporter were part of the second strategy used by Elite League officials to change Swedish hockey. They had noted that, in the words of one of them, “lots of NHL stuff” was being sold in Sweden, primarily to teenage boys, and the League felt that this was a market that its teams needed to exploit better.³⁵ To compete with American team merchandise, however, Swedish clubs needed “an NHL touch” and “some tough Anglo-Saxon slogan,” as *Göteborgs-Posten* put it in a 1995 article.³⁶ The “Americanization” of the products sold by Elite League clubs was, in fact, essential for successful sales, explained a team marketing executive to *Svenska Dagbladet*.³⁷ Färjestad, a club in western Sweden, made a point of studying “how hockey and organizations are structured in the NHL,” focusing on “souvenir sales,” according to the club’s director of marketing.³⁸ Leksand, the team that was eventually sued by the Dallas Stars, also started realizing the importance of souvenirs and established a large store where fans could find “paraphernalia with the team logo and colors.”³⁹

Just as Luleå had led the way when it came to creating an “event atmosphere” during games, it was also the first club to introduce a new Americanized design, making the bear’s head the focal point of the team symbol.⁴⁰ The following season, other clubs followed suit when it came to new logotypes. One of those clubs was Färjestad, whose management had started thinking in terms of “branding” and focused on redesigning the logo.⁴¹

Some clubs also introduced another change: names in English. In the early fall of 1995, Västra Frölunda in Göteborg announced that it would henceforth call itself the Frölunda Indians, and when *Dagens Nyheter* had a graphic designer review the logotypes of each team a few months later, two more teams had adapted English names: the Brynäs Tigers of Gävle and the HV71 Blue Bulls of Jönköping.⁴² In the spring of 1996, *Hockey* noted that “the zoo” of the Elite League had grown further, as the club in Sweden’s third largest city had followed suit, turning Malmö IF into the Malmö Redhawks.⁴³

League executives left it up to each club whether it wanted to implement the changes, and some—notably AIK of Stockholm—never did. Other teams chose to reserve the new symbols and English names for merchandise marketed to fans and kept their traditional team jerseys intact.⁴⁴

The result of the changes of symbols and names seemed, at first, to be spectacular. The club secretary of Luleå, Dan Lundström, told *Aftonbladet* in the summer of 1995 that sales of hats bearing the new bear symbol had quadrupled during the preceding season, and he and his club had visions of sales beyond Sweden, even to the United States. Tommy Töpel, president of the Elite League, claimed in a 1997 *Svenska Dagbladet* interview that sales channeled through the league had gone from SEK 5 million in 1993 to SEK 24 million for the 1996-97 season.⁴⁵

Even before the Dallas Stars accused Leksand of trademark infringement, there were indications that the new names could be problematic. In 1999, one of the main sponsors of HV71, Viking Sewing Machines, started pressuring the team to abandon the Blue Bulls name and logo, as Viking did not want to be associated with Belgian Blue cattle, a controversial breed in Sweden. HV71 began negotiations with the sponsors about a possible name change, but in the end, the club declined to accommodate them.⁴⁶

After only a few years, however, there were signs that merchandise sales were tapering off. Relating the views of Dan Wigelius, marketing director for the Stockholm team Djurgården, *Svenska Dagbladet* thought that “the market is beginning to reach a saturation point.”⁴⁷ A mere year into the launch of the new names, an article in *Göteborgs-Posten* suggested that merchandise bearing them faced a challenging market. Interviewing middle-school students, the paper found that the only thing that they wanted was “American souvenir stuff.” The ambition of Frölunda to take on “the incredibly popular NHL duck from Anaheim” would be an uphill venture.⁴⁸

Clubs seemed to acknowledge that reality after a few years, and in the early 2000s, many quietly jettisoned the new names and symbols and returned to their traditional ones. Thus, when *Aftonbladet* had fashion expert Camilla Henemark rate hockey team jerseys at the start of the 2002-2003 season, only four of the league’s 12 teams still used the new logos on their uniforms: Luleå, Frölunda, Malmö and Linköping. (HV71, standing its ground against sponsor pressure to drop the Blue Bulls name in 1999, had abandoned it by 2002.)⁴⁹ According to what an official of the Swedish national hockey association told one initiated blogger, “the idea was doomed to fail and was consequently phased out very quickly.”⁵⁰

By 2008, when Leksand officials were notified that they were indeed guilty of trademark infringement, they did not seem overly concerned. As they explained to the local newspaper *Falu-Kuriren*, the team had taken steps to abandon the name Stars some years back and return to its traditional name, Leksands IF, citing as a reason that the English name sounded like a thing “from another era, a product of the 90s.”⁵¹ Moreover, merchandise with the Stars name and symbol, a major concern of the Dallas complaint, was no longer available for sale in the Leksand souvenir shop. In its story about the outcome of the lawsuit, *Kuriren* noted in an aside that names in English were a legacy of a bygone time, when “Swedish ice hockey clubs began to take after their trans-Atlantic counterparts and added names like Indians, Redhawks and Tigers to team names.”⁵²

A Public Backlash

One of the few people who had seemed enthusiastic about the changes when they were first made was Staffan Forsman, an advertising art director interviewed by *Göteborgs-Posten*, who praised the logos of Frölunda, Västerås, and Brynäs as “NHL-oriented,” “USA-inspired,” “rock ’n’ roll,” “professional,” and “superbold.”⁵³ English

names were imperative in the “Anglified” society of Sweden, Forsman suggested to *Göteborgs-Posten*, as Swedish was “just corny.”⁵⁴

Other media commentators were skeptical from the start. Even an otherwise positive article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, which noted how profitable the changes had been, began by listing matchups such as “the Wild West drama Blue Bulls against Indians” and the “ornithological high point Black Eagles against Red Hawks,” and then went on to relate what was perceived as a common public view: “Pure nonsense? Many think so.”⁵⁵ Then, before stressing how successful the new names had been for the league, the paper claimed that “many more sensible judges of hockey smile at the more or less fortunate imagination of the clubs.” A columnist writing for the same paper was far more contemptuous, ridiculing club presidents for “trying, in serious voices, to motivate their new name” when all they were doing was “puttering anxiously in the wake of their big brothers on the other side of the Atlantic.” The headline for his column even asked readers which club name was “the most corny.”⁵⁶

John Bark, a graphic designer interviewed by *Dagens Nyheter*, also expressed doubts about the new logos: “It is a little silly to imitate American teams. The Elite League is a very Swedish phenomenon, so why has Luleå chosen a bear that looks like a grizzly, why is the bull of HV71 Spanish, and what does an Indian have to do with Frölunda?”⁵⁷ The 1996 question-and-answer session in *Expressen* about the Americanization of Swedish hockey and basketball that was discussed earlier included an observation that new-fangled ideas brought over from the United States included “ridiculous team names: Indians, Tigers, Bulls and Dragons,” and respondents were asked outright whether team names in Swedish were not preferable to “the American nonsense.”⁵⁸

Responses from the public were largely negative as well. As early as 1996, a letter to the editor of *Svenska Dagbladet* declared that the new names were “embarrassingly bad.”⁵⁹ A 2005 study of so-called “supporter organizations” associated with the Stockholm clubs noted that name changes had been “boycotted and booed.”⁶⁰

When it came to online fan reaction, there may to some extent have been a generational aspect to the opposition, as suggested by a debate at *Språkförsvaret*, a website devoted to battling the increasing influence of English in Swedish society and culture. A poster there had argued that *Språkförsvaret*’s opposition to English names for Swedish teams was “part of a cultural battle, directed at an urban youth generation” and amounted to “generational war.”⁶¹ That argument may have some merit. While the ages of posters on fan sites are not given, references to days gone by suggest that teenage boys (referred to by one discussant as “little kids up to age 16”), the target group for the new names and team symbols, were not particularly numerous.⁶²

Several reasons surfaced for the fans’ displeasure with the new names. While league executives and the occasional advertising art director might think team names in English were trendy and fashionable, ice hockey supporters disagreed. Commenting

on the Leksand-Dallas trademark dispute, a reader of *Falu-Kuriren* declared himself relieved that Swedish hockey was “rid of the American nonsense,” because it was “just ridiculous with bears, eagles and God knows what.”⁶³ Commenting on a 2010 game between the clubs HV71 and Södertälje, a Leksand fan declared the names “very lame,” and his view was supported by a fellow poster who found them “stupid” and saw their appearance as the result of pressure put on teams by league officials.⁶⁴ A discussion thread on the online debate forum Flashback in August 2004 bore the title, “Why such ridiculous names for the hockey teams?” and generated a number of comments, virtually all agreeing with the initiator’s declaration that names in English were ridiculous.⁶⁵ Did league executives not “understand how ridiculous it sounds,” one poster wondered.⁶⁶ Even a contributor who sought to defend Västra Frölunda conceded that “generally, the Americanization of the names is rather foolish.”⁶⁷

Reasons for Supporter Disapproval

Ultimately, it was not the introduction of English into Swedish sports that was a major issue for many fans. Rather, it was the perception that the change had been imposed on fans by the league and the clubs without any opportunity for feedback. It was not the Frölunda supporters who had chosen the Indian as a symbol, stressed one Flashback Forum poster, and a comment on the Svenska Fans website thought he remembered that it was “the league that pressured the clubs into adopting these names.”⁶⁸ To blogger and ad copywriter Per Robert Öhlin, the process to change names and symbols had been started by “some genius in the marketing department at one of the elite league clubs,” and the changes had been “sudden and unexpected” without any contact beforehand with “loyal fans.”⁶⁹

Some supporters also saw underhanded motives on the part of the league that tainted the changes. Names, logos, and uniforms had been changed, thought one Flashback Forum poster, “mainly to sell souvenirs,” and another poster, putting it more sarcastically, explained that English names and Americanized logos sold “lots of souvenirs to the target audience.”⁷⁰

More serious was a perception among fans that league executives were tampering with something that was genuinely Swedish. To one contributor to the Flashback Forum discussion, clubs had “sold out their history and genuineness” to make an impression on teenage boys, and even though another poster thought that such steps may be necessary for “the survival and welfare of the clubs,” he agreed that “history and lineage” had been compromised.⁷¹

As noted in the discussion of fans’ reaction to the new team names, the perception that the changes were imposed on fans from above was a major stumbling block, as was the feeling that the traditions of an established “Swedish” sport was being tampered with.

Beyond the Team Names

In the end, however, the introduction of English team names turned out to be only one aspect of the broader changes taking place in Swedish hockey starting in the 1990s. Far more fundamental—and far less opposed by supporters—was the general commercialization of the sport along lines first in evidence in the United States, documented in Sweden in a number of recent case studies of phenomena such as corporate sponsorship of hockey arenas, sports marketing, the transformation of clubs from non-profit organizations to stock companies, and a growing view of sports as part of the “experience industry.”⁷² The last trend, clearly more far-reaching than the English team names, encountered far less resistance from fans. As a follower of the team in Växjö in south central Sweden put it in 2003, “people are so damned spoiled with entertainment that to attract people it is not enough with 2 teams playing hockey. . . . [i]f people are going to drag themselves to the arenas and fork out 60–70 crowns there has to be more entertainment . . . a party and a good atmosphere.”⁷³

A recent study by Jyri Backman concludes that the Elite League, the highest division, has been “open to international influences, in particular influences from the NHL.”⁷⁴ Recent developments in Swedish hockey have tended to support Backman’s conclusion. In June 2013, officials announced that the name of the highest division would henceforth be the SHL (conveniently serving as an acronym for both the Swedish Hockey League in English and Svenska Hockeyligan in Swedish), a move justified as part of a plan to “provide better entertainment, secure the quality of ice hockey and to generate increased revenue for clubs” and of a vision of “‘the total sports experience’ and the core value of ‘creating feeling.’”⁷⁵ To Backman, this view of a hockey game as an experience is one of the main lessons that the Swedish hockey establishment has learned from the NHL.⁷⁶

Commenting on the change on the SHL website, some fans considered the new name “catastrophic” and “silly,” while others applauded it. As supporters would soon find out, however, hidden behind the marketing jargon were far more fundamental changes, as became evident when news leaked out six months later that the SHL planned to abolish the long-standing European-style system of having the bottom teams in the top league play a round of qualifying games against the top contenders of the next-highest division to determine which teams would be part of the SHL in the upcoming season. Instead, the lowest-ranked SHL club would play the winner of the second division in a seven-game series. Beyond that, two second-division teams in big-city markets with considerable financial resources and large followings might be eligible for promotion to the SHL regardless of their athletic performance.⁷⁷ In an open letter to League officials, furious members of supporter clubs claimed that the changes would amount to a “more or less closed league” where economics trumped athletic values.⁷⁸

Although the new Swedish system most closely resembles that of Finland, the concept of a closed league originated in North America, and the 2013 developments

within the SHL indicated that trans-Atlantic influences that first became visible in the mid-1990s continue to reshape the sport of ice hockey in Sweden.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the globalization of ice hockey has involved an exchange of influences between North America and Sweden. The influx of Swedish players alongside those from other European nations and Russia into the NHL changed the nature of the game in North America and decidedly made the league more transnational with regard to the players' country of origin. Through television and the Internet, the audience for the NHL expanded beyond North America, making it truly international. By the early 2000s, NHL games were broadcast around the world, and the league had started up websites in 11 countries, including Sweden.⁷⁹

It could be argued, however, that the interchange of influences was asymmetrical. The changes in Sweden have been more profound than those in the NHL, entailing, in essence, a broad re-conceptualization of the organizational structure, economic foundations and marketing of the sport. As noted earlier, the introduction of commercial television in Sweden affected the atmosphere of hockey games, putting a greater stress on entertainment. This trend was strengthened by a general commercialization of the sport, which saw clubs transformed from non-profit entities to corporations that focused on marketing. To borrow terminology from Rolf Lundén, trans-Atlantic influences on Swedish ice hockey were both “visible” and “invisible,” and public (and media) reaction to them differed.⁸⁰ The English team names, a readily visible import, were met with skepticism if not outright disdain. The move toward providing hockey fans with an experience in a venue designed for that specific purpose had less evident origins and encountered less resistance.

Notes

¹ Mattias Ek, “Leksand Stars krossat—av Dallas,” *Expressen*, September 1, 2008; Markus Josefsson, “Stars inget för LIF,” *Falu-Kuriren*, September 2, 2008, 18; Ronnie Carlsson, “Leksand får heta Stars, vann logotypestriden,” *Södra Dalarnes Tidning*, November 7, 2006, 1.

² Neil Earle, “The Global Game: The Internationalization of Professional Hockey and Technological Modernism,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 21, no. 1 (1998): 60; see also Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, et al., *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 54–55; Markku Jokisipilä, “Maple Leaf, Hammer and Sickle: International Ice Hockey During the Cold War,” *Sport History Review* 37 (2006): 48–49; John Soares, “East Beats West: Ice Hockey and the Cold War,” in *Sport and the*

Transformation of Modern Europe: States, Media and Markets 1950–2010, ed. Allan Tomlinson et al. (London: Routledge, 2011), 36–37.

³ Soares, “East Beats West,” 35, 43–45.

⁴ Stark, “‘How Swede It Is’: Börje Salming and the Migration of Swedish Ice Hockey Players to the NHL, ‘1957–2012,’” in *Putting It on Ice: Proceedings of the 2012 Hockey Conference—Constructing the Hockey Family: Home, Community, Bureaucracy and Marketplace*, ed. Lori Dithurbide and Colin Howell (Halifax: Saint Mary’s University, 2013), 377.

⁵ George Vecsey, “First Swedes Took Hit for Future,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1998, C1; Soares, “East Beats West,” 44–45; Stark, “How Swede,” 376–77.

⁶ Mike Keenan, “Foreign Talent Is Rising, but Look out for Americans,” *The Sporting News*, December 14, 1998, 79.

⁷ See for instance, Aju J. Fenn et al., “The Influence of Structural Changes and International Players on Competitive Balance in the NHL,” *Atlantic Economic Journal* 33 (2005): 215–224; Haizley Boyce Trevor-Smith, “Salary Determination in the NHL: The Impact of Cultural, Economic and Political Factors on Expatriate Salaries” (MBA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1997).

⁸ “‘Jänkarna’ invaderar elitserien,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, September 4, 2013, retrieved through search of www.svd.se, April 5, 2015; Zendry Svärdkrona, “Importerna lyfter svensk ishockey,” *Aftonbladet*, November 17, 2011, retrieved through search of www.aftonbladet.se, retrieved April 5, 2015.

⁹ Thorbjörn Sprängs, “Unga samlare guldgruva,” *Dagens Nyheter*, January 21, 1995, retrieved through a search at www.dn.se; “European Invasion,” *USA Today*, April 17, 1992, 12c; Roy MacGregor, “Europeans Love NHL,” *Ottawa Citizen*, republished in *Hamilton Spectator*, December 14, 1994, C4.

¹⁰ Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization: European and American Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 159; Jyri Backman, *I skuggan av NHL: En organisationsstudie av svensk och finsk elitishockey* (Göteborgs Universitet, Göteborgs Universitet, Institutionen för kost- och idrottsvetenskap, Rapporter, Idrottsvetenskap, no. 4, 2012), 84.

¹¹ Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization*, 14.

¹² Ulf Jansson, “En sport med rötter i stenåldern och modern vagga i Kanada,” in *Svensk Ishockey 75 år: Historien om svensk ishockey*, ed. Janne Stark (Brunnhaga: Strömbergs, 1997), 11.

¹³ Stark, *Folkhemmet på is: Ishockey, modernisering och nationell identitet i Sverige 1920–1972* (Ph.D. diss., Linnéuniversitetet), 123, 124, 128.

¹⁴ Ulf Jansson, "Ishockeyn etableras i Sverige: första EM, första SM," in *Svensk ishockey 75 år*, 28, 32; part of the reason for the sport's success was that it became associated with urban areas, in contrast to the already established ice-based sport bandy, whose base was in small town and rural areas; Bill Sund, "The Origins of Bandy and Hockey in Sweden" (conference paper, Putting It on Ice: Hockey in Historical and Contemporary Perspective, Gorsebrook Research Institute, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, N.S., 2–7 October 2001).

¹⁵ Stark, *Folkhemmet*, 11; Stark's dissertation carefully and extensively chronicles the growing popularity of hockey from 1920 to the early 1970s.

¹⁶ "Ishockey" entry, *Nationalencyklopedin*, vol. 9 (Höganäs: Bokförlaget Bra Böcker, 1992), 586.

¹⁷ Stark, *Folkhemmet*, throughout.

¹⁸ Henning Eichberg and Sigmund Loland, "Sport and Popular Movements: Toward a Philosophy of Moving People," *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2009): 124–25; "Historia – 1921–1929," homepage, Djurgården Hockey, <http://www.difhockey.se/klubb/historia/1920-1929>, accessed December 30, 2014.

¹⁹ Fahlén, *Structures Beyond the Frameworks of the Rink: On Organization in Swedish Ice Hockey* (Ph.D. diss., Umeå University, 2006), 3.

²⁰ Fahlén, *Structures*, 4; for an extensive comparison between European and North American sports structures, see Backman, *I skuggan*.

²¹ Lars Arnborg, "En ruskdag i oktober ger hockey mest valuta," *Dagens Nyheter*, October 16, 1994, retrieved through search at www.dn.se, Jan 6, 2016.

²² Fahlén, *Structures*, 4, 11.

²³ Invitation, Svenska Ishockeyförbundet, February 10, 1988, Svenska Ishockeyförbundet archives, SE/RA/730270/F4/12, Swedish National Archives, Arninge, Sweden.

²⁴ "Ordförandekonferens," November 18, 1995, Svenska Ishockeyförbundet archives, SE/RA/730270/F4/13; "Årsberättelse, Gästriklands Ishockeyförbund, 1996–97," Svenska Ishockeyförbundet archives, SE/RA/730270/E8a/21; Backman, *I skuggan*, 48–50.

²⁵ "Ordföranden har ordet," *Hockeyboken: Svenska Ishockeyförbundets officiella kalender 1994–95* (Stockholm: CEWE-förlaget, 1995), 7.

²⁶ "Ordföranden har ordet," *Hockeyboken 1995–96* (Stockholm: CEWE-förlaget, 1996), 7.

²⁷ Hasse Andersson, "Effektfull början," *Hockey*, no. 9 (1994): 28–29; Göran Löwgren, "Hockeyn satsar på TV: Ett perfekt sätt att göra PR för sporten," *Dagens Nyheter*, September 19, 1994, D1.

²⁸ "Ordförandekonferens," November 18, 1995. Svenska Ishockeyförbundet archives.

²⁹ Andersson, “Effektfull början.”

³⁰ Löwgren, “Hockeyns satsar”; Luleå never denied the Sharks connection, see Mia Strand, “Frölunda har miljoner skäl att bli indianer i Elitserien,” *Aftonbladet*, June 30, 1995, 31.

³¹ “Björnens gap behåller sitt grepp,” *Aftonbladet*, October 6, 1996, 31.

³² “Sport och sånt: Sport panelen,” *Expressen*, December 14, 1996, B21.

³³ “Sport och sånt: Sport panelen.”

³⁴ Niclas Andersson, “Fy för Frölunda,” *Expressen*, September 28, 1995, 38.

³⁵ Janne Bengtsson, “Elitserien: Djurvärlden en mjölkko för klubbarna,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 10, 1997, 46; Håkan Hermansson, “Amerikanskt för hela slanten,” *Göteborgs-Posten*, September 16, 1995, 40.

³⁶ Hermansson, “Amerikanskt.”

³⁷ Bengtsson, “Elitserien.”

³⁸ Robin Kristiansson and Mattias Svensson, *Att bygga starka varumärken inom idrotten: En fallstudie av föreningarna BS BolticGöta och Färjestads BK* (C-level thesis, Karlstads universitet, 2007), 27.

³⁹ Mikael Fagrell and Anders Bergström, “Leksands IF: Från amatörism till upplevelseindustri” (MA thesis, Gävle University College, 2008), 31.

⁴⁰ Andersson, “Effektfull början”; Strand, “Frölunda.”

⁴¹ Kristiansson and Svensson, *Att bygga*, 25.

⁴² Hasse Andersson, “Läst & Hört: ‘Vilda Västern’ med indianlogo,” *Hockey 1995*, no. 7, 22; “Frölundaskalper i ny dräkt,” *Dagens Nyheter*, June 30, 1996, D11; Anna Kyringer, “Färjestads klubbmärke snyggast – Modos fulast,” *Dagens Nyheter*, November 14, 1995, C9; *Dagens Nyheter*’s idea to review club symbols was hardly original, as *Göteborgs-Posten* had done exactly the same thing two months earlier; “Har HV tagit tjuren Ferdinand till symbol?” *Göteborgs-Posten*, September 16, 1995, 40; according to *Aftonbladet*, the names Blue Bulls and Tigers—along with the Wolves for the Karlstad club Färjestad—were already contemplated in the fall of 1994; Mats Wennerholm, “Modelejonen,” *Aftonbladet*, September 1, 1994, 31.

⁴³ Hasse Andersson, “Läst & Hört: ‘Djurparken’ bara större i Elitserien,” *Hockey 1995*, no. 4, 30.

⁴⁴ Hermansson, “Amerikanskt”; Wennerholm, “Modelejonen.”

⁴⁵ Bengtsson, “Elitserien”; Strand, “Frölunda.”

- ⁴⁶ “HV71 behåller tjuarnamnet,” TT, May 19, 1999; “HV-sponsorer kräver att tjurarna försvinner,” TT, April 30, 1999.
- ⁴⁷ Bengtsson, “Elitserien.”
- ⁴⁸ Hermansson, “Amerikanskt.”
- ⁴⁹ “De är inte störst, inte bäst – men VACKRAST,” *Aftonbladet*, November 16, 2002, retrieved through searching www.aftonbladet.se, retrieved April 5, 2015.
- ⁵⁰ Per Robert Öhlin, “En puck i huvudet och indianer på loftet,” September 19, 2008, Mine Goes to Eleven blog, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.minegoestoeleven.com/2008/09/19/en-puck-i-huvudet-och-indianer-pa-loftet/>.
- ⁵¹ Josefsson, ”Stars inget.”
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ “Har HV tagit tjuren Ferdinand.”
- ⁵⁴ Hermansson, “Amerikanskt.”
- ⁵⁵ Bengtsson, “Elitserien.”
- ⁵⁶ Anders Ljungberg, “Vilket är tontigast? Wolves, Redhawks, Indians eller Lions?,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 11, 1995, 114.
- ⁵⁷ Kyringer, “Färjestads klubbmärke.”
- ⁵⁸ “Sport och sånt: Sport panelen.”
- ⁵⁹ J. and F. Svedbrant, “Hockeyns nya namn är pinsamt dåliga,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 6, 1996, 4.
- ⁶⁰ Dan Porsfelt, “Supporterrock i Sverige,” *Idrottsforum*, September 14, 2005, <http://www.idrottsforum.org/articles/porsfelt/porsfelt050914.html>.
- ⁶¹ “David,” comment on Per-Åke Lindblom, “Språkförsvaret och kampen för en språklag i Sverige,” February 9, 2010, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://sprog museet.dk/sprogpolitik/sprakforsvaret-och-kampen-for-en-spraklag-i-sverige/>.
- ⁶² “Marcarolo,” thread “Varför så löjliga namn på hockeylagen,” Flashback Forum, October 11, 2005, accessed 30 December 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p4>; another poster was in full agreement about the target group for the changes, see “SvenStolpe,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” August 17, 2004, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703>.
- ⁶³ “Ola,” comment on “Opinion,” *Falu-Kuriren* website, September 1, 2008, accessed May 19, 2010,

http://www.dt.se/opinion/tyck_till/article346923.ece?forumId=346923&postingType=normal&mode=read.

⁶⁴ “Tok,” and “DamageINC,” reader comments to “Inför Södertälje-Växjö: LA-plagiatgänget får inte underskattas,” SvenskaFans.com website, March 29, 2010, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.svenskafans.com/hockeyzon/artikel.asp?id=348532>.

⁶⁵ “Der Alte,” and “no1atal,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” August 17, 2004, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p2>.

⁶⁶ “Riddar Tengil,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” October 8, 2005, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p3>; cf. a subsequent poster, who considered the names “embarrassing,” and another, who in a one-line comment dismissed them as “silly, ridiculous, idiotic;” “Snopp,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” January 3, 2006, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p10>; “Wittgenstein,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” November 21, 2005, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p8>.

⁶⁷ “Feldgrau,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” August 17, 2004, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p2>.

⁶⁸ “Tok,” reader comment to “Inför Södertälje-Växjö”; “StyrmanStake,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” September 22, 2007, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p13>.

⁶⁹ Öhlin, “En puck.”

⁷⁰ “Jobe,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” August 17, 2004, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703>; “Mane Attraction,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” September 18, 2006, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p10>; cf. the same point being made in a later Flashback Forum exchange, “vonSlyna,” thread “Saker som stör er i svensk hockey,” Flashback Forum, January 19, 2009, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t464275p50>.

⁷¹ “Bhikku,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn,” October 11, 2005, accessed December 30, 2014, <https://www.flashback.org/t143703p4>; “Marcarolo,” thread, “Varför så löjliga namn.”

⁷² Johan Eriksson, *Arenasponsring: En studie om motiv, upplevelser och prissättning hos de norrländska elitserielagen och deras arenasponsorer* (BA thesis, Umeå School of Business and Economics, 2007), 7; Patrik Nygard and Andreas Pettersson, *Från ideell förening till vinstdrivande företag: En studie av svensk elithockey* (BA, University College of Gävle, 2009), 3; Veronica Eklund and Thomas Rebenstam, *Utmaningar med att kundorientera elithockeyföreningar* (MA thesis, Lund University, 2007), 3–4; Backman, *I skuggan*, 50–54; Fagrell and Bergström, “Leksands IFG,” abstract in English; LHC: Pierre Farkas and Henrik Bodarve, *Strävan efter att öka den totala kundupplevelsen* (BA thesis, Mälardalen

University, 2011), abstract in English; Kristin Nilsson and Martin Fransson, *Marknadsföringens roll inom ishockeyföreningar: En fallstudie på elitserielaget Södertälje SK* (C-level thesis, Kalmar University) 2007, 4; Peter Halvarsson and Stefan Claesson, *Multiarenan, vivion och verklighet: Göransson Arena, Läkrerol Arena och Projekt Strömvallen* (C-level thesis, Gävle University College), iv; Kristiansson and Svensson, *Att bygga*, 26–28; attempts to provide entertainment at sports games is by no means an exclusively Swedish phenomenon—and neither are English club names; André Richelieu, “Building Sports Brands,” in *Global Sports Marketing: Contemporary Issues and Practice*, ed. Michel Desbordes and Richelieu (London: Routledge, 2012), 24.

⁷³ “Buck,” Lakers Lakejer Forum, March 1, 2003, accessed May 19 2010; <http://www.lakerslakejer.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=10741&sid=c720590c146078bb44935a9296418ac2>; a recent study also indicates that fans have come to expect “a show” when watching ice hockey; Farkas and Bodarve, “Strävan,” 17.

⁷⁴ Backman, *I skuggan*, 47–54; 86.

⁷⁵ Johanna Hemming, “Elitserien och Svenska Hockeyligan blir SHL,” accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.shl.se/artikel/38235/>.

⁷⁶ Backman, *I skuggan*, 75–76.

⁷⁷ Adam Eriksson and Adam Nyström, “Här är planerna – som kan revolutionera SHL,” *Expressen*, December 13, 2013, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.expressen.se/sport/hockey/shl/har-ar-planerna--som-kan-revolutionera-shl/>.

⁷⁸ “Öppet brev från Sveriges supporterklubbar,” December 15, 2013, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://northpower.nu/wordpress/oppet-brev-fran-sveriges-supporterklubbar/>.

⁷⁹ Miller et al., *Globalization*, 64.

⁸⁰ Rolf Lundén, “America in Sweden: Visible and Invisible Influence,” in *Within the US Orbit: Small National Cultures vis-à-vis the United States*, ed. Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1991), 141.