

The Psychological and Physiological Effects of the Stanley Cup Playoffs  
A Review of the Literature  
Joe Robinson

Abstract

This review examines the influence of the Stanley Cup playoffs on both the players and fans of the National Hockey League. Canada's most beloved pastime is beginning to gain widespread popularity in the United States. As a result, there has been extensive research into the sport's psychological and physiological effects in the past few years. A recent sociological study determined that suicide rates in the Canadian province of Quebec can be influenced by the playoffs and its relationship to other factors, such as sex, age, and marital status. Other studies have analyzed the reasons for the 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver. Expert opinions on this subject vary significantly. Psychology professor Ervin Staub believes the riots were the result of a decrease in testosterone levels of dejected male fans, who used "destructive means to regain their sense of effectiveness" (Alexander). Whereas author Bill Buford explained that the fans simply found it exciting to riot. Journalists have taken a different approach to examining the effects of the NHL playoffs, opting to report on player superstitions, such as playoff beards and jinxes associated with the Stanley Cup. Even fans have contributed to the research effort by providing a unique perspective on the psychological phenomenon known as the bandwagon effect. Medical professionals have researched the physical effects of the playoffs. A 2006 study by speech pathologist William Hodgetts concluded that fans who attend a single, three hour playoff game can potentially suffer serious hearing damage. Despite these findings, we have yet to realize the full extent of the Stanley Cup's influence on players and fans. Further research may reveal additional effects that were previously unknown.

History of the Stanley Cup and the NHL Playoffs

For 120 years, the Stanley Cup has captivated the minds of hockey enthusiasts young and old. Many consider it the Holy Grail of sports championship trophies. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that there is a wealth of information regarding its storied history. Most historical accounts of the Cup begin with its purchase in 1892 by Lord Stanley of Preston, then-Governor General of Canada. At that time, the Stanley Cup did not resemble the three foot tall, tiered masterpiece that has become such an iconic symbol of hockey in North America. Rather, it was a silver punch bowl known as the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup. The Montreal Hockey Club (also known as Montreal HC) was the first team to be awarded the Cup, having won Amateur Hockey Association of Canada championship. This began a 20 year period in the trophy's history known as the "Challenge Cup era." In order to retain ownership of the Cup, Montreal HC was forced to accept a challenge from Queen's University, the Ontario Hockey Association's regular season champion. Montreal HC managed to remain titleholders after defeating Queen's University 5-1 in a single elimination game. Eight different teams from seven different leagues won the Cup between 1893 and 1914. The National Hockey League became sole proprietors of the Stanley Cup in 1927, thereby ending the "Challenge Cup era" (Jenish and McFarlane).

Historical accounts of the Cup tend to vary in terms of subject matter. For instance, *The Stanley Cup* by D'Arcy Jenish, focuses on the players, coaches, and teams who have changed the face of hockey. The book discusses the impacts made by Hall of Fame manager Frank Selke and legendary Montreal Canadiens forward Maurice "The Rocket" Richard. It also emphasizes the important contributions the New York Islanders and Edmonton Oilers have made to the game. These two teams have shaped the Stanley Cup's legacy more than most other NHL franchises, having won a combined nine championships between 1980 and 1990. Brian McFarlane provides a different perspective in his chronicling of the Cup. In *The Stanley Cup*, he examines the

different decades in which the game has been played, describing the various playing styles and notable stars of each era. McFarlane also offers up a selection of unique stories regarding the teams, players, and coaches who have fought for eternal hockey glory.

The histories of the NHL playoffs and the Stanley Cup are very much entwined. In the first ever postseason game, Montreal HC defeated the Montreal Victorias by a score of 3-2 on the road to capturing their second consecutive championship. Although this game was played before the NHL had been established, it served as a model for future playoff series. Hockey's "second season" has undergone a variety of changes in the Stanley Cup's history. The National Hockey League's website is one of the few sources that contains a list of these changes. The NHL playoffs date back to the 1917-1918 season, when the league was first allowed to compete for the trophy. Since then, there have been 25 different playoff formats used by the NHL. Expansion teams, which first entered the league in 1967, forced the league to adjust the division and conference structure. As a result, the NHL's playoff system was subject to a variety of changes. In fact, the current playoff format was not adopted by the league until to the 1998-1999 season.

### Psychological Effects on the Fans

Recently, a great deal of attention has been paid to the psychological effects of the Stanley Cup playoffs. It is an area of research that is growing more popular by the second, generating a variety of studies in the past few years alone. One of the leading experts in the field is University of Alberta sociologist Frank Trovato, who analyzed the relationship between the Stanley Cup playoffs and suicide rates from 1951-1992 in Quebec. According to Trovato, the playoffs should theoretically cause a decline in suicide rates, because those suffering from depression are more likely to interact with others (i.e. watch hockey with fellow fans) during this time. In addition, he explains that an early elimination of the Montreal Canadiens from the playoffs would result in a "premature breakdown of the informal social context associated with the playoff experience" (105), increasing the likelihood of suicide. Trovato employs two key psychological principles to support this hypothesis: the social integration theory and the routine activities theory.

Trovato's study ultimately fails to show a direct correlation between the Stanley Cup playoffs and suicide. However, the results suggest that suicide rates can be influenced by the playoffs and its relationship to other factors, such as sex, age, and marital status. To Trovato's surprise, young men were most likely to commit suicide in the month of May, during the heat of the postseason race. Trovato believes that the consumption of alcohol, which becomes more prevalent during the playoffs, may have contributed to the increase in suicide rates. Another surprising discovery was that females were more likely to commit suicide if the Canadiens lost in the finals rather than the first few rounds of the playoffs.

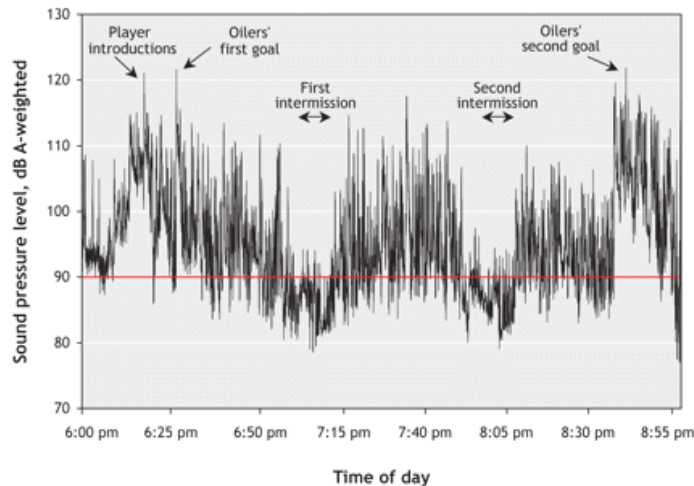
In addition to being a predictor of suicide, the playoffs have been proven to incite anger among fans, as evidenced by the 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver. After the Boston Bruins defeated the Vancouver Canucks in game seven of the finals, thousands of irate fans took to the streets. Cars were overturned, fires were set, and stores were looted. Since then, there has been much debate between psychologists, sociologists, and sports writers over the principle causes of the riot. Some believe the fans were acting out of frustration. Northern Ohio University psychologist Bob Carrothers explained that the riots were an "emotional release" for the disgruntled fans, who considered the Canucks loss an attack on their identity (Schwartz). Psychologist Ervin Staub from the University of Massachusetts suggests a similar theory: "People invest themselves, their identity, very much in the sports clubs" (qtd. in Alexander). The riots were a way for these emotionally distraught fans to regain their sense of self-confidence. However, University of British Columbia sociologist Rima Wilkes believes the fans were actually expressing joy. "[The fans] weren't even angry. They were having fun" (qtd. in Todd). Although we may never know the true intentions of the Canucks fans, the playoffs certainly played a significant role in the destruction of Vancouver.

Professionals are not the only ones to have researched the effects of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Fans have presented their own findings regarding the trophy's influences. Ryan Goldade, a Canucks fan and writer for *Just A Lil Hype! Magazine*, offers his explanation for the phenomenon known as the bandwagon effect. "The easiest way to explain the bandwagon fan is that it is someone who is just joining a trend. The city is buzzing and everything right now is about hockey. If you want to fit in right now, knowing something about the team is the best way." While bandwagoners are often criticized by their more devoted counterparts, Goldade indicates that new fans add to the diversity of the fanbase. This is particularly true in the city of Vancouver, where a large percentage of the Asian immigrant population has developed a passion for the hometown Canucks.

### Physiological Effects on the Fans

The NHL playoffs last anywhere between one week to two months, depending on the success of the team. It has been well documented that the postseason is a particularly grueling period of time for those players who make it all the way to the Stanley Cup Finals. However, there has been little research into the physical effects sustained by the fans during the playoffs. One of the few exceptions is a 2006 study performed by audiologist William Hodgetts and his colleague Dr. Richard Liu, in which they examined the hearing damage caused by brief exposure to an excessively loud environment. Liu himself is the subject of observation: he and his wife attended three of the Stanley Cup Final games between the Edmonton Oilers and Carolina Hurricanes. Liu was equipped with a noise dosimeter, which measured decibel levels inside of Edmonton's Rexall Place, one of the loudest arenas in the National Hockey League.

The audiometric and otoacoustic tests performed on Liu's data yielded some surprising results. Each time the Oilers scored a goal, noise levels within Rexall Place reached 120 decibels, which is "roughly equivalent to the sound level of a jet taking flight" (Hodgetts 1541). Even during the first and second



intermissions, fans were exposed to over 90 decibels of noise. For reference, Hodgetts indicates that one is normally exposed to 85 decibels over the course of an eight hour work day (each game lasted no more than four hours). As a result of this excessive sound, "each person in the arena not wearing hearing protection received about 8100% of their daily allowable noise dose" (1541). It took just six minutes for the volume within the building to reach these levels. Hodgetts concludes by elaborating upon the hearing damage sustained by Liu and his wife. Liu "experienced a decrease in the strength of the

outer hair cell responses while his wife experienced a temporary threshold shift in one ear of 20 dB" (1541). These effects could become permanent if the ears are subjected to additional noise.

Based upon Hodgetts' research, one may get the impression that watching hockey is only capable of producing negative side effects. A 2008 study by a team of University of Chicago psychologists proved otherwise. After observing a group of 29 test subjects, it was determined that watching hockey can actually enhance the brain's ability to function. The study consisted of 12 professional and college hockey players, eight hockey fans, and nine non-fans, each of whom listened to a variety of hockey-related discussions; the players and fans had a better understanding of the language. The explanation behind this phenomenon lies in the portion of our brains dedicated to planning and controlling. "While the planning and controlling area of

players' and fans' brains was activated while they discussed the sport, the same area was *not* activated in non-fans' brains" (Pawlik-Kienlen). According to head researcher Sian Beilock, "non-language related activities, such as playing or watching a sport, enhance one's ability to understand language about their sport precisely because brain areas normally used to act become highly involved in language understanding."

Although this study does not exactly pertain to *playoff* hockey, Goldade's article suggests that a majority of new fans are likely to start watching hockey during the postseason. If this is the case, then one could reasonably assume that the Stanley Cup playoffs are the source of this boost in brain power.

### Superstitions of the Players

The influence of "Lord Stanley's Mug" is not limited to hockey fans. Just take a look at today's NHL stars and it's clear that they too are affected by the Cup's hypnotic allure. Superstitions, such as playoff beards, are a prime example of the trophy's impact on players. Playoff beards trace their roots (pun intended) back to the early 1980's, when the entire New York Islanders team sported them en route to four consecutive championships (Ogden). Although they disappeared soon after the Islanders' 1983 Stanley Cup victory, they made a surprising comeback in the early 90's and have been a staple of the NHL playoffs ever since. Many All-Star players have grown playoff beards in recent years, including Predator's defenseman Shea Weber and Penguin's center Sidney Crosby. But this begs the question, why do players practice superstitions? It may have something to do with their preparation; many



players use superstitions as a way to focus. "Having the same meal before you compete; or, under a jersey, somebody may like to wear the same shirt every game; or a baseball player who continues to wear the same hat without washing it" are examples says sports psychologist Dr. Rick Van Haveren (Roope 1).

Another common superstition is the refusal of the Eastern and Western Conference champions to touch their respective trophies, out of fear that it will jinx their Stanley Cup hopes. Like playoff beards, this superstition seems to help many players focus on the task at hand: winning the Stanley Cup. *Hockey News* editor John Grigg explained that "You are celebrating something that's not the end goal of your season. It seems like the players just want to leave that one alone and worry about what's next" (1).

### Conclusion

Research has shown that the Stanley Cup playoffs are capable of eliciting a variety of psychological and physiological responses. The playoffs have been proven to alter mental states, as well as impact the physical well-being of the National Hockey League's players and fans. We have learned more about hockey's impact in past the decade than we have in the previous 110 years of the Stanley Cup's history. That being said, we have yet to fully realize the extent of the playoffs' effects. For instance, Frank Trovato's study revealed that the Stanley Cup playoffs can cause an increase in the suicide rates of fans. But we do not know whether the same could be said about the players. Do players who lose heartbreaking playoff games go through states of depression? Additional research may answer this question and unearth additional effects of the Stanley Cup playoffs that were previously unknown.

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