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Why we pray for a Stanley Cup

As traditional religion wanes, Canadians find spirituality in the rituals of hockey, researchers say

May 27, 2009 04:30 AM

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ANDREW CHUNG
 QUEBEC BUREAU CHIEF

MONTREAL – Thousands of worshippers, a pristine altar, an artifact of their sacred deity raised up above them in exaltation, closer to the heavens.

Or, a crowd of hockey fans around the red-carpeted ice, the famous tri-colour number 29 jersey hoisted to the arena rafters, honouring Montreal Canadiens goaltending great Ken Dryden.

For Rose Tekel, the similarities are just too stark to ignore. The religious studies professor at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S., says hockey rituals, such as the retirement of an exceptional player's jersey, are rooted in religious traditions and practices.

Tekel, with her husband, Matthew Robillard, presented a paper on the subject yesterday at the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, a gathering this week of liberal arts researchers at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Tekel isn't the first academic to compare Canadian hockey fandom to religious fervour.

But her focus takes note of the ritual aspect of the sport, and of other non-religious human endeavours, and comments on how people increasingly find therein a sense of spirituality.

"It's not that hockey is a form of religion," Tekel said, "it's that hockey can be seen as part of the wide terrain of religious experiences."

Many people are moving away from institutionalized religion and into "marginalized religion," she said.

"What they're saying is that they want in some way to be connected with something beyond themselves, but they don't want ... organized religion."

Tekel cites research on surfing or whitewater kayaking, often seen as a spiritual quest.

Then there's hockey, which is packed with rituals illustrating this sense of spirituality.






Watching the retirement of Dryden's jersey, on Jan. 29, 2007, Tekel remarked, "We thought this looks like a religious experience, the Bell Centre has become a kind of cathedral."

Dryden, a six-time Stanley Cup winner and now the MP for York Centre, said in an interview he didn't experience the ceremony as a religious ritual, but he can see some parallels.

"Anytime you go into an NHL arena it's a remarkable atmosphere," Dryden said. "You just don't have many occasions where you have a lot of people in the same place with the same thing in mind."

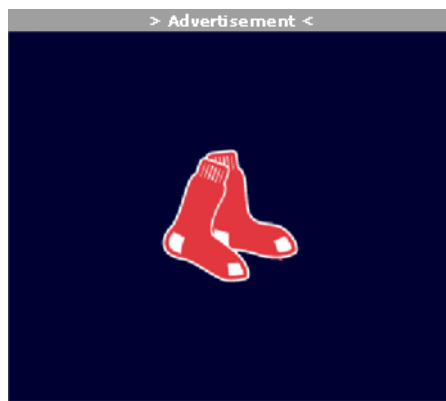


RYAN REMIOWZ/THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO
 Former Montreal Canadiens goaltender Ken Dryden and members of his family gather at centre ice in the Bell Centre in Montreal as his number is raised on Jan. 29, 2007.

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If hockey really is a religion, where do you fit in?

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He mentioned watching the 2006 jersey retirement of Bernard Geoffrion, who died on the day of the ceremony.

"Because of what was happening, it's as if that jersey is being raised to heaven."

Dryden, whom the researchers interviewed for their paper, also mentioned the many individual and collective rituals players and teams go through before a game.

"You have nothing you can count on that's going to deliver the result you want," he said. "The only thing you have under control is the ritual or the superstition you create for yourself."

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