Coming Down the Mountain

RETHINKING THE 1972 SUMMIT SERIES

EDITED BY BRIAN KENNEDY
“Forty-plus years on, the Summit Series exists for Canadians as a set of what might appear to be uncomplicated facts. It was ‘us’ versus the big ‘evil other.’ Our guys banded together, despite early setbacks, to win. ‘The goal’ was a never-to-be-forgotten moment of triumph that united a large and politically fractious country. Access to this set of commonplace beliefs is as close as the nearest Internet-connected computer, DVD player or library bookshelf. Maybe it’s as close as the nearest Tim Hortons, where the question ‘Do you remember September 1972? is likely to spark recognition, discussion and camaraderie, even amongst those too young to have witnessed it in person, or those who lived elsewhere at that time.

“This volume exists, in large measure, to ask what else there is to the Summit Series.”

—Brian Kennedy, from the Introduction

From hockey sovereignty in Quebec to the impact of the 1972 Summit Series on the development of women’s hockey in Canada, from media retrospectives of the Summit Series to considering the rise and shift of mythic tradition, these fifteen essays from hockey scholars around the world examine the Summit Series from every angle. The result is a collection that gives us fresh insights into the legacy of the series and the way it has influenced, and continues to influence, hockey inside and outside of Canada, as well as the country itself.

Brian Kennedy’s prior books include Growing Up Hockey (Folklore, 2007), My Country Is Hockey (Argenta, 2011) and Pond Hockey, a novel (Argenta, 2013), and he has contributed to the hockey anthology Now is the Winter: Thinking about hockey (Wolsak and Wynn, 2009).
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For my sister, Sandra, who shared the moment with me in 1972, and my brother-in-law, Phil, who shares it with me now.
From Sweden with Love: The Summit Series and the Notion of the Contemporary Canadian Hockey Player in Sweden

TOBIAS STARK

Faceoff

The 1972 Summit Series between Team Canada and Team USSR is generally recognized as a watershed in the history of hockey. The communications director of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), Szymon Szemberg, has even branded the tournament as the "eight games that changed the sport forever" (63). Much of the importance attributed to the event has to do with it being the first time the best European amateur players were allowed to square off with the top professionals of the fabled NHL. Besides, the series soon paved the way for the migration of generations of Europeans to North American professional hockey, as the NHL found out the hard way that the standout players in the Old World were truly world-class talent.

Given its notoriety amongst hockey fans and others alike, it is hardly surprising that the Summit Series has been the subject of considerable historical deliberation, ranging from several anniversary reunions and a flood of commemorative books to a series of TV documentaries and numerous academic treatises. In fact, the scrutiny of the outpourings on the Canadian national sentiments accompanying Team Canada's victory in the tournament has almost become a literary genre in its own right.
However, the impact of the Summit Series on the hockey world at large, and its influence on the international game, has yet to be thoroughly examined. In the following, I will analyze the implications of the Summit Series on the notion of the contemporary Canadian hockey player in Sweden, through an account of the Swedish reactions to the tournament at the time of the event. The aim is to build on the conventional historical narrative of the 1972 Canada-Soviet hockey series by situating it in the larger historical context of contemporary Sweden. I will argue that the Summit Series is not so much to be understood as "the birth of top level international hockey" as some commentators have contended (Pelletier and Houda, 7), but rather the beginning of the NHL's hegemony of the hockey world.

In order to consider the perception of Canadian hockey in Sweden, it is essential to note that since its "discovery" the American continent has served as a blank canvas in the Old World, upon which the Europeans have been able to project their innermost dreams and fears. Although the Swedish conception of "America" has been formed primarily with the USA in mind - while Canada has been more or less conceived of as being "the same but different" than its southern neighbour - the general Swedish understanding of the Canadian game of hockey is an excellent example of this logic. When hockey was introduced in Sweden at the beginning of the 1920s, it was not seen merely as a new sport, but rather as an expression of the coming of the modern age, as the notion of "America" was deeply interwoven with the concept of "modernity." For some this meant the promise of a better way of life, as openness, rationality and personal freedom were cherished features of the social fabric of the New World. Others dreaded the lure of "Americanization," as they equated North American customs with immorality, sensationalism, and alienation.

Thus, when hockey was introduced in Sweden in the interwar era, there were those who welcomed the game with open arms, as they envisioned it as an international sport perfectly suited for life in modern society. Still, others strove to thwart the launching of the new sport since they regarded it as a corrupting force, undermining endemic values and traditions. Gradually, however, most of the strong suspicion towards hockey gave way to a widespread appreciation of the game among the Swedes, prompted by, inter alia, a growing predilection for "American" commodities in general, as well as by Swedish triumphs in international competition and the great admiration Swedes held for visiting Canadian teams, such as the legendary Victoria Hockey Club (Montreal), whose players were publicly heralded as outstanding athletes and noble gentlemen of the greatest kind.

After 1945, the public interest in hockey exploded in Sweden, as the game was turned into a Cold War battleground. In the highly politicized culture of the time, the Swedish Nationals - or Tre Kronor (the "Three Crowns"), as they have been popularly known - came to function as a thermometer of how the so-called "Swedish model" (i.e., the blending of private and civic interests that has come to be seen as typically Swedish) stood up in comparison to the superpowers of the world. A central ingredient in the make-up of the Swedish self-image during the postwar era concerned Sweden as "a world conscience," working for peace and solidarity on the international level. This aspect of the national identity also came into play in sport, as the Swedish hockey community fought to put oil on the troubled waters of the international game. Simultaneously, however, the perception of the Canadian hockey players was transformed.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Canada ruled more or less supreme in international hockey competition. The quality of Canadian hockey was actually so high that second- and third-rated student and senior men's amateur teams could outplay the best European national squads on a regular basis; hence, the deep-felt adoration of the demeanour of the members of the Victoria Hockey Club and their countrymen in Sweden. However, the successful entrance of the Soviet Union on the international hockey scene in 1954 - beating the Canadian representatives, the East York Lyndhursts, by a whopping 7–2 on their way to capturing their first World Championship - marked the beginning of a new era in the game. Team USSR went on to dominate the international competition the following four decades, earning gold medal honours in a total of eighteen World Championships and five Olympic games, staged between 1954 and 1989. The Soviets' prowess, together with the steady improvement of the Czechs and the Swedes, meant that the college - and amateur - teams Canada sent to international tournaments could no longer count on placing high in the standings.
The sifting power balance in international hockey was hard to swallow in Canada. Canadian hockey representatives soon came to accuse the Soviets of cheating: the state-sponsored USSR players were not true amateurs but cloaked professionals, they maintained. Also, Canadian officials set out to persuade the IIHF to allow professionals to participate in the World Championships, subsequently withdrawing from international hockey in protest of IIHF President Johnny Francis "Bunny" Ahearne's opposition to the proposal. On the ice, the frustration manifested itself among Canadian players in a growing reliance on force – and intimidation – tactics (fighting, trash-talking, etc.) to overcome their opponents in international tournaments.

Concurrently, the notion of Canadian hockey was transformed in Europe, as the Canadian players went from being considered good sports to being characterized as violent goons. For the Swedes, the beginning of the 1960s seems to have been a particularly critical period in this regard, as the amateur senior men's team Trail Smoke Eaters toured Sweden in 1961 and 1963 and literally crushed their opponents. The result was a public outcry over the supposed brutality and unsportsmanlike conduct of the Canadians. Apparently, some Swedish parents even began invoking the Canadians ("If you don't behave yourself, the Trail Smoke Eaters will come and get you!") in order to "scare" their children "straight" (Mårtensson). Subsequently, while the notion of Canadian hockey was deteriorating in Sweden, the Swedes turned to Eastern Europe for influences and deliberately started to mimic the Soviets' game (i.e., their successful emphasis on team play).

Yet, the Swedes neither embraced the Soviets altogether nor spurned the Canadians completely. As Team USSR kept on dominating in the World Championships, it became increasingly evident that amateurs from Sweden and the rest of the hockey world could no longer compete with the "cloaked professionals" from Eastern Europe. In fact, in the absence of a viable Team Canada, the superiority of the Soviet players – and their Czech allies, who were state professionals as well – threatened to turn the World Championships into a farce, as all their opponents could aim for was to win the bronze medal. To breathe new life into the World Championships, and to have Canada return to the international hockey family for the sake of solidarity, Swedish officials began lobbying for the IIHF to allow Team Canada to use professionals in international competitions, even getting the IIHF delegates in 1970 to accept a "modernized" version of amateurism, meaning that an amateur was a player who got most of his income from his civic career (Svenska ishockeyförbundets årsberättelse 1970/1971, 5–6).

International hockey was at a crossroads: the only way forward was letting the best amateurs in Europe face the skilled North American professionals, it seemed.

**The Fight of the Century**

During the World Championships in Prague in April 1972, the news broke that the Soviet Union was to play a series of exhibition games later that year against an all-star team made up of Canadian NHL players. In Sweden, the report was met with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the hockey community greeted it with great jubilation, since it had been dying to see Canada return to the international hockey circuit – even more so because the event in question involved present-day NHL stars, rather than mere "re-amateurized" farmhands, as first might have been expected, as much of the debate on Canada taking part in international hockey since the 1960s had centred on how many reinstated former professionals Team Canada was allowed to dress. Hence, the forthcoming challenge series was widely acknowledged as "a dream tournament" and labelled "the fight of the century" since it was seen as the answer to a long-standing question: Which brand of hockey was the best – the European or the North American (Olsson, "Antigen NHL"; Carlson, "...och en svensk"; Jansson, "Skandal")?

On the other hand, many Swedish commentators feared the Canadians took the task too lightly. The Swedes were truly flabbergasted the Canadians had agreed on facing Team USSR in September, a time of the year when the NHL players would not be in their best shape because of their summer holiday, while the Soviets were widely known for their tough year-long fitness regime. Albeit the general consensus in Sweden was that Team Canada would beat Team USSR, it was considered to be so much up for contest that neither side could afford to take any chances. Also, and more important, there was a nagging concern that the event beckoned the coming of a professional European...
hockey league that had been rumoured for some time, controlled by either the
NHL or the newly founded World Hockey Association (WHA). Up until that
point, only one European-trained player – the Swedish power forward, Ulf
Sterner – had ever played in the NHL, but the growing numbers of profession-
al scouts at international tournaments had the Swedish hockey establishment
up in arms, as it feared losing its best players to North America. 1 Thus, it was
not just the cloaked professionalism of the Soviets and the Czechs that haunted
the Swedes in the beginning of the 1970s, but the fear of the North American
hockey industry preying on the Swedish hockey program as well.

Amid all the initial hoopla about the Summit Series, it should be noted
that when the puck finally dropped between Team Canada and Team USSR,
the interest in the tournament seems to have been lukewarm at best among the
Swedes, at least as far as the first games in Canada were concerned. Sure, all
major Swedish media outlets had reporters on-site covering the tournament,
but the all-overriding event in Europe in September 1972 was the Olympic
Games in Munich, especially after the terrorist attack in the Olympic Village
on September 5, which saw seventeen people killed. Unsurprisingly, this
tragedy appears to have had a cooling effect on much of the general interest
in sport in contemporary Sweden, even leading to a mounting criticism of
the purported politicization, commercialization and elitism of modern sport
(“OS ett hån”; “Politiken pressar idrotten”). Though only small portions of this
criticism surfaced in the reporting on the Summit Series, the debate certainly
worked to counter much of the initial excitement about the tournament among
the Swedes.

Furthermore, the Swedish hockey community seems to have had much
of their mind elsewhere. In fact, the president of the Swedish Ice Hockey
Association (SIHA), Helge Berglund, was criticized in the press for leaving his
post, having travelled to Canada to follow the first leg of the tournament on-site
(Ericson, “Hockey-sekreteraren”). The status of Swedish hockey was ques-
tioned after a shaky performance by Tre Kronor in the World Championships
earlier that year, and Berglund going abroad to witness the Summit Series first-
hand was consequently not considered to be in the best interests of the national
program. Unsurprisingly so, as the Tre Kronor coach in the aforesaid tourna-
ment was the former NHLer and Toronto native Billy Harris, who was much

appreciated by the players but publicly challenged by vocal parts of the hockey
community on the grounds of retaining a North American coaching style unfit
for Swedish hockey culture.

Whereas the Swedes had taken the Canadian sport of hockey to their
hearts decades before, and while the renowned NHL was universally celebrated
as the best league in the world, the fear of the game being an instrument for
distorting North American influences thus lingered on in Sweden. Actually,
the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw the general notion of
“America” take a turn for the worse in Sweden, by way of the Vietnam War and
the flourishing environmental movement, which saw the US being criticized
for its perceived bullish foreign policy and its supposedly cold and superficial
consumer society. The fact that Canada was not part of the USA, but an inde-
pendent nation, is an issue of mere academic interest in this context, as the two
countries for most contemporary Swedes could be described as “same, same,
but different.”

In part, this revived anti-Americanization stance – or anti-Canadianiza-
tion stance, to be more precise – also surfaced in the reporting on the Summit
Series. Following the opening bout, the Soviets’ 7–3 ousting of Team Canada
in Montreal, all major Swedish newspapers ran quite spiteful stories on the
so-called “death of the myth of the invincibility of the Canadian professionals”
chockat”). At great length, the authors discussed the supposed arrogance and
hubris of the Canadians’ icing such a badly conditioned team in “the fight of
the century.” At the same time, when reading the newspaper articles today, one
is struck by the bias the members of the contemporary Swedish hockey com-
munity must have felt; it having being proved that the European game was just
as good as the North American game, if not even better. Yet, this contention
appeared to be a double-edged sword, as it led to the bleak conclusion that the
future would see a rising demand for Europeans in North American profes-
sional hockey. The news that the Detroit Red Wings’ owner, Bruce Norris, was
just about to launch a professional league in Europe, as announced a few days
later, did nothing to ease that anxiety – quite the opposite. 2

Still, it would be wrong to say that all the Swedish reporting on the
Canadians was negative during the first leg of the tournament. For example,
Team Canada's victory in the second game against the Soviets (4-1) was hailed as a true test of character, where the players re-established Canada's tarnished reputation. Individual Canadian players, such as Phil and Tony Esposito, were also applauded for their splendid performance on the ice. Furthermore, the home crowds' sportsmanlike conduct – applauding the Soviets after they had outplayed Team Canada in games one and four – greatly impressed the Swedes, as patriotism did not get the better of the passionate Canadian hockey fans (Norén, “Kanada chockat” and “NHL-proffsens matcher”).

Then again, neither the good nor the bad Swedish press on the Canadians regarding the first four games of the tournament could compare with the levels of deep adoration and severe aggravation directed at Team Canada while in Stockholm.

Team Canada in Stockholm

Though labelled “the fight of the century,” the real treat of the Summit Series for the Swedes was not the Canadians’ and the Soviets’ battle for world hockey supremacy, but Team Canada’s visit to Stockholm on its way to Moscow for the final leg of the tournament. The SIHA was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, and the two exhibition games between Tre Kronor and the star-laden Team Canada, on September 16 and 17, were meant as the icing on the birthday cake. The Swedish National Stig-Göran Johansson captured the great excitement among the Swedes before the matchup well, when stating that facing the legendary NHLers “was something he had longed for since wearing knickerbockers” (Eriksen, “Bara en match”). Besides, both games sold out in an instant, despite being aired live on national television while having ticket prices four to eight times more expensive (depending on where the seats were located in the arena) than during the Swedish Championships the same year. Also, the organizers charged admission to Team Canada’s practices, but that did not stop crowds of about five thousand people from following their workouts with great interest.

In fact, the fuss about the NHLers being in Stockholm was so great that Swedish reporters followed their every move. Upon arrival, all major Swedish media outlets were brimming with material on the “famous professionals” and the “super phenomena,” as the Canadians were dubbed (Larsson; Norén, “Här är TV). Among the players, the superstars Bobby Orr and Phil Esposito grabbed most of the attention, followed by the solid, but otherwise often overlooked, defender Gary Bergman. In the case of the former, it was the illustrious athletic abilities as well as the luxurious celebrity lifestyles of the idolized players that occupied the Swedes. In the later case, it was rather Bergman’s Swedish heritage that fascinated the fans. Bergman talked with Swedish reporters in great detail about his parents leaving Sweden for Canada in the beginning of the twentieth century, his distant Swedish relatives and his dream of coaching in Sweden following his retirement from the NHL (Kvärre).

Swedish pundits also commented on Bergman’s professed old age (thirty-two years old), his bald-headedness and the fact he had kept most of his own teeth, albeit being a seasoned NHL veteran. These remarks might strike a present-day reader as odd and offending, but they must be understood as expressions of the contemporary conception of sport in Sweden as a youthful undertaking, as well as a recurrent theme in the criticism of North American professional hockey in Europe during the Cold War: the terror of facial injuries. Actually, when Ulf Sterner left Sweden to join the New York Rangers in 1964, he was derided by the confounded SIHA – who were disappointed in him for ostensibly abandoning the national program – as an egoistic diva in great danger of having his teeth knocked out by the so-called North American hoodlums (Ishockeyboken 1964-1965, 90; Eklöw, “ Första proffsfiaskot”).

Apart from portraying individual players, Swedish reporters also took time explaining Team Canada’s playing style to the fans, while underlining the North Americans’ emphasis on shooting, forechecking and intimidation tactics. Before the first faceoff, all Swedish experts seem to have agreed that Tre Kronor was the underdog. Some believed Team Canada would win quite comfortably, but others maintained the Swedish Nationals could in fact beat the renowned professionals. After all, the Soviets had shown the world the fabled NHLers were mere humans, they argued (Åslund, “Ikväll bekänner”; Norén, “Så slår ni Kanada”). One to do so was the newly appointed Tre Kronor coach, Kjell Svensson, who had stepped in after the SIHA and Billy Harris had agreed on not extending the latter’s contract. According to Svensson, the Swedes were more than able to beat their guests as long as they played their...
own game, putting emphasis on skating and puck possession, as well as if they held their own ground against the sturdy professionals. But, intimidated the Swedes were.

The Swedish National, and later Toronto Maple Leaf, Börje Salming has stated that the Swedish players were actually in awe of the Canadians just from reading their names in the paper. On the ice, the NHLers’ abrasive and hard-hitting playing style startled the Swedes, who lost 4–1 in the first exhibition game on September 16. After the game, Svensson admitted to Tre Kronor of having had too much respect for the Canadians; some players were even said to have been downright scared of the North Americans. Nor were the players the only Swedes to be daunted by Team Canada’s behaviour. The following day, all major Swedish media outlets ran stories on the contended upsetting actions of the Canadians. Headlines such as “Thrash, Canada” and “Team Ugly” were the order of the day. Overnight, the initial veneration of the prominent visitors was replaced by a belligerent criticism of Team Canada among the Swedes, in some cases bordering on real xenophobia. In fact, the disgust at the Canadians was so great that they received a bomb threat, meaning their hotel had to be searched by the police before they could go to sleep after the game (Jansson, “Skräp, Kanada”; Åslund, “Kanada”; Byström, “Team Canada”). Yet, the worst was to come.

Before the second game, Team Sweden talked about standing up to the Canadians. The result was a brawl-filled bout pigeonholed as the worst tussle the Swedish audience had ever seen (Åslund, “Blodet som bevisar”; Ericson, “Slagsmålen fortsatte I pauserna”). The game ended in a 4–4 draw, but the score must be characterized as a Pyrrhic victory for the involved parties, as the ice surface was literally covered in blood when the players left the rink after the final buzzer. The nastiest incident occurred near the end of the first period, when Ulf Sterner (accidentally as the Swedes saw it, but purposely according to the Canadians) cut Team Canada’s Wayne Cashman quite badly in the mouth with his stick. Cashman left the game to get stitches but was soon back “in action” wearing street clothes while trying to get back at Sterner in the Tre Kronor dressing room, but he was hindered by the Swedish police, who wrestled him to the ground. Other notorious incidents included a fierce yelling match at centre ice – where Phil Esposito and Kjell Svensson exchanged unpleasantries, questioning each other’s manliness – as well as Vic Hadfield’s high-sticking of the later Winnipeg Jet Lars-Erik Sjöberg, breaking the Swedish captain’s nose.

The next day, the Swedish press had a field day printing front page photographs of Sjöberg and his blood-spattered nose and calling the Canadian players “animals,” “gangsters” and “perpetrators of violence.” Some commentators even suggested the Canadians had better leave early for Moscow, as they were no longer welcome in Sweden. The aggravated situation actually had the Canadian ambassador, Margaret Meagher, going public to lament the excessive violence in the supposedly friendly games, something most Swedish onlookers must have taken as a formal apology and proof that Canada as a nation was officially disgraced. After the game, the members of Team Canada hung out in their hotel; those who wanted to step outside were instructed by coach Harry Sinden not to wear their team blazers, as the Canadians did not want to attract any more unwelcome attention before leaving for Moscow a couple of days later (Byström, “Kanadaglansen”; Åslund, “Blodet”; Sterner; MacSkimming, 137).

The notion of the Canadian hockey player was at an all-time low in Sweden. But things were about to change.

**Curtain Fall**

It is safe to say Team Canada’s ill-fated stay in Stockholm put a strain on the Swedish–Canadian relationship, at least as far as hockey was concerned. In Sweden, for one thing, it meant the rejuvenation of the notion of the Canadian hockey player as a violent goon, an image that has been in circulation in one form or another since then. Also, Team Canada’s visit stirred a spirited debate on what the future might hold for Swedish hockey, considering the NHL’s and the WHA’s rapidly growing interest in European talent. Some claimed allowing the semi-professionals in Tre Kronor to become full-time players was the best way to offset the coming wave of Swedes signing lucrative contracts with North American clubs (i.e., the draining of the national program). Others saw the realization of a professional European hockey league, such as the one Bruce Norris hoped to launch, as a way to keep the best players on home ice. However, according to SIHA President Helge Berglund, that line of reasoning
Coming Down the Mountain

did not add up, as most ice rinks in Sweden were aimed at recreational activities for the young, rather than being designed to suit the capitalistic exploits of the owners of professional hockey clubs. In the end, neither Norris’s nor the WHA’s rivaling attempt to launch a European professional hockey league materialized, because the Soviets and the Czechs bowed out of participation (Bystrom, “Proffshockey i Europa”; Lindberg; Olsson “Striden går vidare”). But the tide was turning.

In Sweden, there seems to have been a generation gap with respect to the issue of Sweden’s position vis-à-vis the North American hockey industry. For one thing, the SIHA was divided into two camps, with old-timer Helge Berglund representing a fraction of the board that feared being subjugated by the NHL and the WHA, and the other – led by the younger Ove Rainer, who succeeded Berglund as the president of the organization the following year – maintaining it was better to work with the NHL and the WHA than being totally dominated by them. Besides, the Swedish players were keen on making hockey their full-time job. In fact, a number of the Swedish nationals later admitted that the exhibition games against Team Canada really got them thinking of playing in the NHL or the WHA for the first time, as they had proved to themselves and others they could compete with the best players in the world. At the time, Ulf Sterner was actually bold enough to reveal he saw the games as an opportunity to show his worth in order to get a lucrative WHA contract (Carlson, “Ulf Sterner spelar”; Salming and Karlsson, 46).

Furthermore, while the Swedish interest in the Summit Series was lukewarm at first, the Canadians’ stay in Stockholm turned the final leg of the tournament into a smoking hot affair, as the games were no longer perceived as a mere battle of world hockey supremacy but as a test proof of the future of the sport, per se. The major media outlets in Sweden reported the games and the undertakings of the NHLers unabatedly, in some cases even increasing the coverage. The fact that Swedish national television obtained the rights to a live broadcast of the last game of the series shortly before the event, and seemingly was the only European country to air the matchup, is a telling example of this (Jansson, “Nu skrattar”; Åaslund, “Ingen drömshockey”; Kvärre and Sjögren).

Interestingly enough, most contemporary Swedish commentators agreed that the best team ultimately won the Summit Series. Sure, the Canadians were still considered to be bruisish players, but their ability to rise to the occasion and come out on top after the poor start greatly impressed the Swedes. The Canadians might have been criminals on the ice, but they were proper gentlemen outside the rink; they only acted like villains in order to win, as they were so competitive they did whatever it took to triumph, it was argued (Ericson, “Dödstrött – men överlycklig”; “Trots allt bråk”). Apparently, the Swedes had an easier time digesting the Canadian’s aggressive playing style when they thumped the Soviets than when Team Canada was facing Tre Kronor a week earlier.

At first glance, this seemingly abrupt leniency about the Canadians’ ferociousness might appear strange. Yet, on closer examination, it appears to be a result of the tangible love-hate relationship the Swedes have had with Canadian hockey since the game was first introduced. It is a strong bond involving alternating emotions, ranging from sheer devotion to total disgust, though the pendulum has swung back and forth over time. Following the Summit Series, in Sweden the general notion of the Canadian hockey player seems to have slowly shifted in a positive direction. This is perhaps most evident in that aggressive-role players such as Bob Probert, Sean Avery and Dan Carcillo have become big fan favorites in Sweden, beside more traditional hockey heroes like the offensively skilled superstars Wayne Gretzky, Sidney Crosby and Steven Stamkos. This should come as no surprise, because the period in question has seen Sweden become all but completely incorporated into the North American hockey industry as the NHL has gained a hegemonic position in the hockey world at large.

The aforementioned Salming’s stellar NHL career may actually be read as a barometer of the gradual Swedish adaptation to the NHL brand of hockey and the interrelated transformation of the notion of the Canadian player. When Salming signed with the Toronto Maple Leafs in 1973 after an impressive showing in the exhibition games against Team Canada in September 1972, he was considered a talented but somewhat unruly defender in Sweden. While most Swedes were happy for him, part of the Swedish hockey establishment seems initially to have lamented the move as a token of the dreaded draining of the national program. However, Salming’s instant success in Toronto – as the first European superstar in the NHL – and the overwhelmingly warm welcome
he received from the home crowd during the 1976 Canada Cup helped stir the interest in the NHL in Sweden tremendously while opening the door for the migration of generations of Swedish players to professional clubs in Canada and the USA.

When Salming, aged thirty-eight, returned to Sweden to play in the World Championships in Stockholm in 1989, he was treated as a “living legend,” having played sixteen seasons in the “toughest league in the world.” Before long, he was dubbed “the manliest” and “the sexiest” man in Sweden (Treschow Andren; Israelson). This is particularly noteworthy because it was mainly his supposed sensual face and body – marked by numerous injuries sustained during his lengthy NHL career – on which the then middle-aged Salming’s reputation as a genuine Swedish role model and potent sex symbol was grounded; that is, the same attributes (the old age and the tarnished body) that Gary Bergman and others were ridiculed for displaying before the mass movement of Swedish hockey players to the NHL began after the Summit Series.

Nowadays, the interest in the NHL seems as vibrant as ever in Sweden, and the ultimate dream for the players has more or less come to mean hoisting the Stanley Cup, rather than representing Tre Kronor in the World Championships. Thus, it can be argued that the Summit Series is not so much to be understood as the birth of top-level international hockey, but rather the beginning of the NHL’s hegemony of the hockey world.

1 Ulf Sterner made his NHL debut on January 27, 1965, for the New York Rangers in a game against the Boston Bruins. Sterner went on to play four games in the NHL before returning to Sweden the following season.

2 On this, see Cruise and Griffiths.

3 The ticket prices in the exhibition games ranged from forty to sixty Swedish kronor, compared to the five to fifteen Swedish kronor for tickets to the 1972 Swedish Championships.