

“Hello, Canada – and Hockey Fans in the United States”

*Remembering the days when Hockey Night in Canada
brought the family together on a Saturday night*

BY KEN DRYDEN

It was in 1936 that Imperial Oil first sponsored hockey broadcasts on radio, and ever since, the company has been inextricably linked with Canada’s national winter sport. By the Second World War, *Hockey Night in Canada* had become so much a part of Canadian life that the broadcasts of the games were sent to our troops overseas to bring them a bit of home.

Over the years, Imperial’s support of hockey broadened. Through the Esso Medals of Achievement Program, the company has given medals and certificates to nearly two million young hockey players, honouring sportsmanship, dedication and improvement. Working with the Canadian Hockey Association (CHA), the company sponsors national teams and championships, including the 1998 Olympic men’s and women’s hockey teams and a number of programs designed to instill a love of the game in children and to build not just champions on



ice, but “champions in life.” Last year, for example, through the Esso Schools Program, more than 12,500 children across the country attended world championship games or other major hockey tournaments.

A founding member of the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, the co-creator of the Esso Maple Leafs Memories and Dreams Room at the city’s Air Canada Centre and a major sponsor of the National Hockey League, Imperial believes that hockey is and should remain part of life in Canada. Says Brian Fischer, a senior vice-president at Imperial: “We’ll be there as long as there’s a patch of ice and kids with dreams.”

In the following essay, Ken Dryden, a former Montreal Canadiens goalie, coauthor of *Home Game: Hockey and Life in Canada* and the current president of the Toronto Maple Leafs, takes us back to the Saturday nights of his childhood, recalling his long association with hockey and Imperial.



As a boy,
Ken Dryden (top)
knew Murray Westgate
(above) as his friendly
Imperial Esso dealer.

I was born in 1947. I’m sure I listened to games on radio first, but I don’t remember. I was a television kid.

I came to an age of memory just as TV was being introduced in this country. We weren’t the first on the block to get a TV set. My father, a salesman of anything and everything who had settled into bricks and blocks and who knew all about fads, had wanted to be sure that TV would last before he invested in one. When we moved to our new house in 1953, he was convinced.

Television was a big deal. For me, it wasn’t the

miracle of moving pictures coming into our family room through a glass screen that fascinated me. I was too young for explanation to matter – everything in my world just was. What mattered was what came on that screen, especially sports. I had learned to recognize names of teams and players in newspapers before I could read. Now I could see the players for real right in front of me. I remember the World Series games, watching the last few innings after I rushed home from school, the late afternoon shadows of the stands of New York’s Yankee Stadium and Brooklyn’s

TOP PHOTO, COURTESY KEN DRYDEN; IMPERIAL OIL ARCHIVES



In the 1950s, television brought families together, says Ken Dryden. There weren't many channels, and Saturday night generally meant *The Jackie Gleason Show*, followed by the hockey game with Foster Hewitt.

Ebbets Field – it was always the Yankees and Dodgers in those years – stretching across the infield. And I remember the hockey games.

They were only on Saturday night, and not the whole game was televised. As a family, we would watch *The Jackie Gleason Show* from 8 to 9, featuring The Honeymooners, with Ralph and Alice and Norton and Trixie, the June Taylor Dancers and “the flower of the musical world, Ray Bloch,” as Gleason would introduce his orchestra leader each week. Then, at 9 o'clock, the game came on. Sitting on chairs, on the chesterfield and on the floor were my mom and dad, my grandmother, who lived with us, and my brother, who was six years older than I was and just beginning to play on a real team. My sister, then only a few years old, was probably asleep in her bed.

It is hard to convey to anyone under the age of 40 how central TV was in our lives then. Kids might have been involved in activities outside school – in sports, in Cubs or Girl Guides – but it was before a time when “being the best you can be” pushed kids to become prodigies and parents to want to create them. Balance was the goal, developing the whole child the understood task, and one or two nights

out a week was considered plenty. Because there was no incentive to generate more for kids to do, there was much less for them to do. For adults, there were fewer nights at the office. Most evenings, families were at home. In the spirit of postwar times, they knew that's where they should be. In the early years, TV was understood as an instrument of family building. It brought the generations together and gave them a common experience, gave them common names to talk about and a way to bridge a generation gap that rock music and blue jeans were threatening to widen.

Then there was only one TV in a house. A family had to agree on what to watch. But that wasn't hard because there wasn't much to choose from. In our house in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke, we got three stations – the NBC and CBS affiliates from Buffalo and CBC. And while today's critics may remember that time as the golden age of CBC, with its ambitious drama, comedy and current affairs shows, for a seven-year-old kid, there was nothing golden about it. I watched cartoons, westerns and baseball on the Buffalo stations; on CBC, I watched only *Hockey Night in Canada*.



In Quebec, Philippe Robert served as the Imperial Esso dealer on La Soirée du hockey.



Playing the Canadian game: (left to right) Gordie Howe with Pat Quinn; "Rocket" Richard; George Armstrong and Serge Savard.

Everything about it was special. It was Saturday night. It was staying up late. It was the family all together. It was seeing adults get more excited than you ever saw them at other times (just my father and grandmother; my mother was always calm and serene), saying and doing things as impolite as things you thought only you did. It was watching a game you were beginning to know and love played by players you wanted to be. It was the one time of the week that never came fast enough. So everything and everyone associated with Hockey Night in Canada was special.

Foster Hewitt had been broadcasting Toronto Maple Leafs games on radio since the team was established in 1927 (he made his first hockey broadcast in 1923). There had been a fear at first that radio would be the end of spectator sports. After all, who would choose to venture into a Toronto winter night when one could "attend" a game on radio in the comfort of one's own parlour? Instead, the reverse happened. Radio generated interest in sports – people wanted to see in real life the players they followed on radio. But when those opportunities weren't available, radio was the next best thing. And on radio, no game is unexciting. No player blunders. Radio stirs the imagination, and in darkened rooms, sometimes half a continent away from the game, the imagination paints pictures of giants. Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones and Red Grange were radio giants. So were Roosevelt, Churchill and Hitler.

Radio created an immense appetite for hockey. More and more kids wanted to play it; more parents wanted to encourage them. From his gondola nearly 20 metres above the ice at Maple Leaf Gardens, Hewitt became our national storyteller, growing in status beyond even those great players he talked about, outlasting them all. He helped to create a national habit. An Imperial ad of the time captured Hewitt's impact:

Dateline. December 1936. Saturday night.

Six o'clock in Vancouver, Pacific Standard Time, and those just home from work snap on their radios before sitting down to dinner. Seven o'clock in the Peace River, Mountain Time, and pioneering families rise from the evening meal to gather around their receiving sets. Eight o'clock on the Winnipeg-Brandon road, Central Time, and an Imperial Oil dealer twirls the dial to CKY. Nine o'clock in Sudbury, Eastern Time, and nickel miners turn up the "volume" as they settle comfortably to listen. Ten o'clock in Saint John, Atlantic Time, and time to tune in for thousands of Maritime families. Eleven o'clock Newfoundland Time, and fisher folk wait expectantly for the familiar voice.

And from far away, emanating from an eyrie high above a gleaming white surface of ice with a large blue Maple Leaf in the centre, comes the voice three out of four radio listeners in Canada tune in to hear at this time every Saturday during the winter months. And then Hewitt speaks his famous greeting, "Hello, Canada – and hockey fans in the United States and Newfoundland."

His opening words became a national greeting. People from coast to coast to coast were hearing the same voice at the same time. Hockey and Hewitt had created a national connection.

Two decades later, when I was a kid, Hewitt was still calling Leafs games, now being simulcast on radio and TV. In our back-yard games, as we imagined ourselves to be Frank Mahovlich, Ted Kennedy and George Armstrong, we announced the game in our heads. The voice was Foster Hewitt's: "Mahovlich picks the puck up at his own blueline; at centre, over the line. He winds up. He shoots ... he scores!"

We threw our hands in the air. For us, as for almost every person in the country who attended



Foster Hewitt
began broadcasting
Toronto Maple
Leafs games on
radio in 1927.



Canadian legends: Bobby Orr (left); Paul Henderson (standing centre) during a game in the 1972 Canada-Soviet hockey series.

NHL games only through a glass screen, a game, a real NHL game, was played with a voice.

It was also played with Murray Westgate. I don't think I knew he was an actor at first. I'm not sure it would have mattered. We were kids. What mattered to us was the hockey game and everybody that was part of it. Murray Westgate was our Imperial Esso dealer. He welcomed us to the game. He sent us up to the gondola and Foster Hewitt. And during intermissions, he told us about Atlas Tires and Atlas Batteries and how on cold winter nights Esso and Esso Extra gas could prevent – dread now entering in his voice – “carburetor icing and gas-line freezing.”

He wore an Esso uniform with matching pants and zippered jacket tight at the waist, a white shirt and a dark bow tie. On his head was an Esso cap, worn at a slight, confident angle, the way my father wore his fedora. Westgate was friendly. He was nice. He smiled. He talked to us in his gravelly baritone voice without hurry, as the 60-second and longer commercials of the time allowed. He knew what he was talking about. He explained. He wanted what was good for us.

I knew all the jingles and sang along: “Who put the confidence in Mrs. Murphy’s motor...?” It wasn’t until decades later that I learned it was a take-off of a line from an Irish song, “Who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy’s chowder?”

And my favourite, which even today I sometimes sing in the shower:

*What a great, great feeling,
What a wonderful sense,
Of sheer enjoyment and of confidence,
For that something you’re aware of,
Your car’s been taken care of,
At the Esso sign of confidence,
At the happy motoring sign.*

Imperial was part of the game, just as Foster Hewitt and Frank Mahovlich were. A few years ago, I did a six-hour documentary series for CBC called *Ken Dryden’s Home Game* about hockey and how it affects, is affected by and reflects life in this country. To end the series, I wanted to create a special scene: a celebration game and a skate-past on Ottawa’s frozen Rideau Canal of all those who have shaped the game and created its memory. The Rocket would be there, so would Gordie Howe, Bobby Orr and Wayne Gretzky; Mr. Zamboni would clean the ice; Roger Doucet would sing the anthem. A descendant of Foster Hewitt’s would do play-by-play. And standing beside him would be Murray Westgate. It never happened. But it should have.

Murray Westgate and Imperial were part of our experience of the game. As Westgate told us each week, *Hockey Night in Canada* was brought to us by our Imperial Esso dealers, agents and distributors all across Canada. We had *Hockey Night in Canada* to watch because Imperial brought it to us. No Imperial, no game. That’s how it seemed to me.

And for me, that’s where it all began. I wonder if the Imperial people of the time knew the impact that *Hockey Night in Canada* had. They may have known as adults know – by the increase or decrease of gasoline sales from one month to another or from the number of new Esso cardholders. But I don’t think they knew as kids know. I went to Joe O’Brien’s Esso station at Thorncrest Shopping Centre to pump up my bike tires. To this day, when I need gas I go to an Esso station unless I’m about to run out and there isn’t one around. I don’t do it because Imperial is a major sponsor of the Leafs and that’s what I’m supposed to do. I do it because more than 45 years ago Imperial was involved in something that meant a lot to me and which has left me with lifetime memories.

I owe them. □

Ken Dryden strikes a typical pose during a game in the 1970s.

