

Luck in the vocabulary of motives of professional ice hockey

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines an important aspect of professional ice hockey. While the game has become increasingly commodified and rationalized, and so organized on scientific and economic grounds, the notion of luck still finds a place in interpretations of action and outcomes in the sport. As one feature of the vocabulary of motives present in hockey, the use of luck makes sense when understood as a concrete manifestation of the underlying moral understandings of what is understandable and sensible about hockey. The fact that empirical uses of luck can be contested indicates the presence of underlying moral logics of the game that are not systematized and compelling but rather permeable, historical and open to different formulations. The use of luck in hockey, even though sporadic and contingent, up the rationality of the game and makes it possible to inhabit a moral world where the best does not always win and the worst does not always lose.

KEYWORDS: sport, luck, motives, contestation, professional, hockey

You've gotta be good; but you've gotta be good and lucky.

We had no luck at all. The puck just wasn't bouncing for us out there tonight.

All he needs is a little more of the old puck luck around the net.

Sometimes you shoot and they all go in. Other nights you just can't buy a goal.

It's just the luck of the game.

We were very lucky out there tonight, but you make your own luck.

It was just a lucky goal, but they all count in the end.

Introduction

For several years now I have collected occurrences of the use of luck in constructing understandings of events and actions in the National Hockey League (NHL). I have not collected these occurrences in any systematic manner, indeed they do not appear to happen in any empirically systematic manner, but I have done so with a developing sense of the need to understand such occurrences from a perspective grounded in the anthropology of sport—I am concerned with the culture of the game and in particular with how the game is rendered knowable—coupled with a concern for the possibility of luck as

part of what has been identified as a ‘vocabulary of motives’ (Burke 1935, 1969; Mills 1940) deployed to make sense of events and actions hockey. My interest here is to show how it is possible to use luck, in its many guises, to render understandable hockey performances when the NHL has been shaped overwhelmingly by economic considerations and the systematic training and development of the talent of the players.

My argument is that the use of luck as part of the vocabulary of motives in hockey makes sense when we connect its empirical manifestations not to other empirical manifestations—I do not seek some generalized account grounded in empirical correlations—but rather to the underlying moral assumptions that allow for interpretations and their contestation. It is this connection to the morality of the game that allows for the creativity in the way the uses of luck are made manifest. The use of luck in hockey, even though sporadic and contingent, up the rationality of the game and makes it possible to inhabit a moral world where the best does not always win and the worst does not always lose. In all of this, luck takes many different forms, but to be understandable its use must be grounded in a moral understanding of the sport.

Conflict, Drama and Luck in the National Hockey League

The National Hockey League (NHL) is the premier professional hockey league in North America, and the world. The NHL is now at the centre of an industry that generates billions of dollars every year from ticket sales, services connected to its team’s arenas, media contracts, the sale of memorabilia, and from an expanding variety of other player, team and league income streams. The NHL is a business, run as an enterprise comprised of many smaller enterprises—its teams, characterised by the logic of rational calculation—economics—in almost every aspect of its operations. The NHL was not always the pre-eminent form of hockey in Canada and the United States. It struggled to gain control of the market and to make itself the unmarked game (Kidd 1996: 184–231; Wong 2005). However, while the public may well be aware of this, the NHL is now the pre-eminent sport for many, a game that embodies drama, where results are grounded in competition and where outcomes reveal the moral character of the players and coaches, its teams, the cities and regions that teams can be said to represent and, by extension, those that emotionally support and identify with their team (Moore 2002).

Even with more than thirty teams making up the league, there are more players who seek to play in the NHL than there are places on team rosters. Players must work hard to find employment and to keep it in the NHL. And with good reason. With an average salary of over \$1 million per year, playing in the NHL can be a very lucrative experience; while the rewards for those who make it are significant, there are many who dream of playing in the league irrespective of any financial reward. Young men, in particular, may invest hours of time working to improve their physical fitness and hockey skills. A regime of physical exercises and the development of hockey skills now characterises the game at every level. The game has a particular place and significance, particularly in the Canadian imagination (Gruneau and Whitson 1993), which encourages a close identification with it and symbolically connects hockey performance and possibility of success. There is, for many, great joy in playing and following the sport.

Hockey is an agonistic team sport. Teams and players compete in a skillful and physically challenging contest to win a game. As such, conflict is at the heart of the sport. And, as Kenneth Burke reminds, for a symbol-using animal, conflict leads to drama. In professional hockey, as played in the NHL, the drama that is engendered through and around the game takes place both on and off the ice. On the ice, there is the desire of both teams, and hence all the players, to win rather than to lose. And off the ice there is the drama for all those who watch, listen, talk or read about hockey as accounts, interpretations and explanations emerge and are consumed and contested by both professionals and amateurs.

Some years ago Tannenbaum and Noah (1969) argued, in an inelegant but revealing little analysis, that the culture of sport was widely shared by those who take an interest in it. There is no simple community of interest made by any sport but rather a community drawn by an ability to recognise appropriate accounts from inappropriate accounts, or at least about how to argue the toss about such matters. In showing that both the producers of accounts and the consumers of those accounts shared the code—‘sportugese’ they called it—Tannenbaum and Noah located a sense in which a sport community could be both open to anyone who sought to take part in it. Tannenbaum and Noah conducted their research by showing how broadcasters and those listening or watching shared sensibilities regarding the choice of words, particularly verbs, to describe a defeat. Losing by five points in a hard fought and high-scoring American football game can be described as a ‘close and hard fought game’ while losing by five goals in hockey where the score is five to nothing can be described as a ‘thrashing’. To use the words for the outcome of one game to describe the other would surely surprise those who share in the knowledge of the particular games.

It is not just the understanding of words for winning and losing that are shared in any sports community. Guiding my argument is the proposition that the use of luck, in its many different forms, is not arbitrary in the culture of hockey but that it is a tactical resource to be used to interpret and to understand events and outcomes when acknowledged talent, hard work and character do not seem appropriate. Luck, in this sense, is not of some integral cosmological order, a metaphor to be lived by in the sense suggested by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), but rather it is some ambiguous rump category that can be invoked—and challenged—as deemed appropriate. I am mindful that it could very well be dubious to jump too quickly to a cosmology of luck that gives it a more central and perduring presence in the culture of hockey. Such a position has been clearly articulated more generally for anthropology by Keesing (1978). I am also mindful that not to consider such an interpretation would make it almost impossible to find luck in a cosmology of hockey. My perspective, drawn more from the work of a number of social analysts concerned with the study of motives (McHugh et al. 1974; Peters 1958), and particularly from Kenneth Burke (1935; 1969) and C. Wright Mills (1940), seeks to understand luck as one particularly interesting aspect of the vocabulary of motives through which events and actions in hockey are made understandable. Motives are words for describing, or encompassing, situations rather than any biological or psychological determinants of action.

By running counter to the logic of the professional game, the focus on luck provides a particularly useful way into understanding the dramatism¹ of hockey. Hockey, like other sports, tends to be a highly moral activity in the sense that what happens and what is revealed is taken to reveal the character of those involved. Such moral concerns are integral to modern sport in the ways that they make the games speak to issues far larger than just some pastime. Wardrop's account of the downfall of South African cricketer Hansie Cronje nicely captures just this sense; the scandal leading to his shameful downfall as captain of the South African cricket team must be read as a moral tale, full of local resonances and significances, rather than merely a lapse in judgement or illegal act (Wardrop 2002). Without his personal acceptance of moral responsibility there could be no redemption for Cronje personally but also, and more generally, for South African cricket. Cricket, like hockey and all sports that attract and retain public interest, are redolent with morality, both of the players and of the public that follows the sport.

The dramatistic perspective in the study of social life that most clearly captures a concern with the morality of all action is most closely associated with the work of Kenneth Burke. Spanning the humanities and the social sciences, Burke's work has been found useful in making sense of both social action and texts. Seeing both as forms of symbolic action Burke elaborated his understanding of motives that have been used to make sense of symbolic action. His work resonates widely but it is not an easy body of work to enter into and to use. As he was engaged in the ongoing elaboration of his understanding throughout his life there is created a sense of him lurching from one set of terms to another, with the connecting threads not always as explicit as one might desire. In the study of sports Joseph Gusfield's account of 'sport as story' (Gusfield 2000) is perhaps the best attempt to draw from Burke insights for the analysis of what we are engaged in when we watch, listen and read about sports (as opposed to merely playing them). Indeed, it is this concern for the storying of sports that is most useful here: players and others closely engaged in professional and amateur sports must also make sense of the games.

In adopting the intellectual spirit of Burke to guide the analysis I am drawn to his understanding of motives as public names for situations. As one set of authors have suggested, motives 'are public and observable courses of action' (McHugh et al. 1974: 23). For Burke, the core insights of his dramatism follow from the recognition that where there is action there is conflict and where there is conflict there is drama (1968). The resolution of this drama can take several different paths. In hockey, for example, it is less about victimage and redemption—Burke's chosen form in this genre—than it is about the revelation of moral character and the victory of the best team over all others. The fact that the best team may not have all the best players allows for yet more scope in a dramatistic analysis—with the ongoing and irresolvable conflict of individual and team at its core.

¹ Kenneth Burke (1968) introduced dramatism as a method for understanding the social uses of language. It views language as a mode of symbolic action rather than a mode of knowledge. Dramatism's intent is to offer a logical method for understanding human motives or why people do what they do (Fox 2002) and can be understood as the belief that language is a strategic, motivated response to a specific situation (Griffin 2006).

Hockey, like other sports, depends on the dramatic in order to have and hold its audience. Games or individuals that are not capable of generating drama are anathema to the sport, both as a sport and as a business. A central task of journalists and broadcasters is to find the dramatic possibilities in any game, be it for a team, teams, or players. Without drama there is no compelling reason for the game to interest anyone. It may well be possible, but it is sure the minority of fans, who can watch a game without cheering for one side or the other. The game itself is so physical and fast, with the potential for violence always close by, so that one writer has referred to it as a game requiring ‘grace under fire’ (Scanlan 2002). It is this tension that characterises the drama that is a hockey game.

Inside the Culture of Hockey

The culture of NHL hockey is vast. The increasing commodification of the league since its inception in 1917 can be seen in the increased amount of media coverage and public discussion. The NHL now receives scrutiny in the media of all manner of aspects of it. The game is played and reported in so many different places that no consumer or producer can be in all of them or access all of it by any means. More accounts, interpretations and explanations are produced everyday in the media than can be consumed by any single individual. The task for all those who follow the game is to make sense of what they are informed about the game. To do this, one needs to enter into the culture of the game, to understand how hockey is talked and what sorts of interpretations are permissible and how to argue with those who would disagree. To do this is to enter into an understanding of the underlying concerns and morality of the game. This does not require absolute or complete agreement among all those who follow the sport; there is ample room for contestation as well as agreement, but one has to learn how to talk the talk if one wants to be taken seriously. While there are accounts that seek to make the words used to talk hockey understandable (Poteet and Poteet 1996), this involves much more than just knowing the appropriate words. Understanding hockey in any social context requires that you understand how to talk the game, how to offer an interpretation and how to contest the interpretations of others.

Not all accounts of hockey receive equal attention. In hockey it is the ‘inside’ story that is most privileged; and this inside story is constituted quite systematically. The game played in the NHL is reported by a range of professionals who often have the authority of experience on their side. This does not mean that the public must accept these professional accounts. They can be contested—over a beer at the local pub, at work, on talkback radio and in a myriad of other contexts. However, in all cases there is a question of authority of any account. In the culture of hockey the practice is to recognise that the game is not equally open to all who may have an interest. There is an ‘inside’—Goffman (1959), from his dramaturgical perspective, may well have called it ‘backstage’—and a more public talk about the game. Many accounts that are made public enunciate claims of making the ‘inside’ public—so that one past president and CEO of the NHL, Gil Stein, published an account subtitled ‘An inside look at the big business of the National Hockey League’ (Stein 1997). Examples proliferate. Journalist Stan Fischler’s account of *Cracked Ice* (1995) is subtitled *An Insider’s Look at the NHL in Turmoil* and, similarly, broadcaster

Howard Berger's account of *On the Road* (1995) is subtitled 'An Inside View of Life with an NHL Team'. It is an interesting paradox that when the inside story of events or actions associated with the NHL are made public they cease to be just 'inside' information. Most followers of the game only have access to the inside story when it is made public and revealed to the mass audience.

The inside accounts of the game do offer up one significant distinction between the concerns of players and those who watch or otherwise follow the game. For players, it is their careers and livelihoods that are on the line and their talk must be positioned and understood in this way. They may well take part in the culture of the game as well, but they have a set of concerns that are not shared by all who follow. The public, however, does not see the game in the same way. Among those who only follow the game there is more of a managerial perspective in its culture. The talk is from the perspective of 'experts' who see and have opinions about performances and potential. After presenting an account of baseball, Bradd Shore allowed a student of his to capture this difference in perspective when, following Shore's brief account of baseball, the student, who was himself a former player, briefly commented that for players in the game there is a much more immediate set of performances, tactics and strategies than for the majority of fans (Shore 1996). Indeed, players and others perform quite differently in their attempts to demonstrate competence or skill. We may all share an interest in the game that happens on the ice, but off the ice we produce a plethora of heterogeneous accounts.

There are accounts of hockey that give emphasis to the cultural context in which the game is played and followed. That is, they focus primarily on the contexts in which the game is played and experienced—the players' perspective—rather than on the substance of the shared accounts of the game. Some of the better accounts of hockey have been produced using such a perspective. In Colburn's account of violence in the NHL (1985) he sought to understand the cultural rules shared by players regarding the use of violence. It is interesting that he explicitly denies that one could use the understandings of the audience as well, or that the audience could share such understandings. Colburn is interested in giving us the 'insider's' account. Similarly, in Faulkner's accounts (1973; 1974) of 'respect and retribution' and of 'making violence by doing work' adopt a modified symbolic interactionist perspective to understand the role of violence in the game. Both Colburn and Faulkner focus on violence, a perceived problem in the sport when they were writing, in order to show that it is not chaotic and undisciplined. Rather, understandings of how violence can be used are shared by players in the game. These authors do not deal with the culture of the game nor do they identify the ways in which moral character is identified. They do recognise that violence is more than chaos in the game and that the 'rules' by which it is prosecuted by players and teams reveals an underlying cultural code of what is acceptable and what is not. It is interesting that even among the players this code of violence is occasionally broken as stick swinging does take place, as players are king hit and physically injured and as players' careers are adversely affected by other players doing the unexpected. Even the moral code of the players is not sacrosanct and does not attract full and complete compliance. Neither Colburn nor Faulkner poses their research questions in ways that move beyond the description of the moral order of the players' understandings.

I think we can go even further, and deal with far more than just violence, to see that in understanding the game both players and fans have to give it recognised form and shape so that their experiences are rendered meaningful in the accounts that are given. More recently Robidoux (2001) has written of a minor league team and the experiences of the players on its roster. His account is more flexible and he draws on a wider range of sources than do Colbourn and Faulkner. At times he makes extensive use of former player Ken Dryden's insider's account of *The Game* (1982) to show the sorts of meanings shared by those in the professional game. In the very act of writing as a former player, Dryden too takes part in this ongoing making public of the inner game. The inner game can never disappear. No individual or collection of persons can ever make everything public about the game. And because the game is an ongoing activity, new experiences and events are always being generated: there is always something new to be shared. But this is not the way that the inner game is used to legitimise some accounts over others, to identify and privilege some voices over others. The 'inside' accounts of the game are interesting and attractive, but remain overly empirical and descriptive and, therefore, not sufficiently analytical for the sort of account I propose here. Their concerns are with the order of the moral codes they describe rather than with the social logic of the conditions that make it possible to talk about motives such as luck.

Winning and Losing and the Revelation of Moral Character

While hockey in the NHL is a business and must, therefore, play and compete by economic rules, it is also a sport and has a range of concerns that come with this particular aspect of its business. To be successful, a team must do well off the ice, in terms of business, and produce income greater than expenditure. The public is usually less concerned with this sort of economic performance. 'Our team made more money than your team' is not a common catch-cry among fans around the NHL.

In the NHL, along with other professional and commodified sports, aspects of organizing and playing games that were developed in the nineteenth century have become transformed. In the nineteenth century there developed, particularly in England and then became transferred with British imperial hegemony, a notion now identified as 'muscular Christianity' (Clarke and Critcher 1985). In the private schools of England in the last half of the 19th century organised sport, diffused with the spread of English sporting practices, became increasingly important (Mangan 1991; Ladd 1999). Sports were seen as integral to the development of character in young men. Lessons learned on the playing field, about putting the needs of the team first, about playing in a fair and just way and respect for one's opponents become lessons that make the character of young men. This concern with the lessons of the playing field—a healthy body and a healthy mind—was transferred around the world with the growth of amateur sports.

However, with the growth of men's professional and commodified sports, the notion of muscular Christianity is given a different shape. Instead of playing a role in the development and inculcation of moral character, professional sports transformed this relationship so that a concern with the revelation of character becomes increasingly significant. In play, professional athletes reveal what their character. Their performances and

the performances of their clubs become manifestations of the character of the players and the collectivities that are the teams. As adults, and professionals, they are watched not to see how they develop—this is more an amateur concern—but to see how well they perform, what they are made of, how they will deal with and perhaps overcome adversity that comes with agonistic games. And from these public displays of character, reputations—a very public aspect of identity—are forged for players, teams and regions.

As far as winners and losers in the game are concerned it does not matter what happens to those who do not make the big game. We are—just about—all losers if that is our measure. Instead, it is performance in the NHL that shapes a reputation as winner or loser. Merely making the NHL is no public measure of being a Winner. Indeed, within the NHL there is a clear sense of the understanding of players as ‘making it’ and those who do not, those who become ‘stars’ and those who remain ‘journeymen’, those who have ‘careers’ in the game and those who struggle to find a place.

A winning team—a team of winners or a team that is a winner—need not have all great players on its roster. A team needs a variety of different sorts of players if it is to be successful. A dependable goalie, reliable penalty killers, scorers and the ‘muckers’ that do their jobs by grinding down opponents over a game or a series, who are sometimes described as the ‘role players’ on a team, are all important for a successful team. A team is always a mixture of different skills and abilities of its players. The task of management is to bring disparate players together and nurture them so that they will bond into a functioning team. As part of the managerial perspective by which many hockey accounts are positioned, there is enduring debates on such topics as what players any team needs to contend for the Stanley Cup, how the players should be positioned by the coach, and whether a player is worth his income or not.

Over time, the moral character of player and team may indeed become apparent. At the least, there becomes a record of achievements that allow for such a discussion. It is accepted in the NHL that ‘on any given night any team can beat any other team’ but not that this can extend over the lengthy season, and postseason play. It is over the years a player or team reveals its moral character. In the NHL, the greatest measure of this for any team and platers is the performance in the competition for the Stanley Cup.

The Stanley Cup

Perhaps no other award in hockey makes the moral character of the game so sharply apparent as the winning or losing of the Stanley Cup; and perhaps no other feature of the game as the competition for the Stanley Cup makes the place of luck in its culture so subservient to moral character. The Stanley Cup winners are the only team to end the entire season on a winning note. All other teams in the league go out as losers. The history of the Cup is well documented and its significance for the NHL and hockey more generally has been examined many times. This trophy, awarded since 1896, is now in the care of the NHL and is awarded at the end of every season to the team that is declared the winner. This requires a team to make the playoffs after a regular season of over 80 games and then must win a knock-out playoff series that sees the winning team play a best of five game series and then three best of seven game engagements (one could suggest that he

playoffs are long as the need for the income is great). The team that wins the Stanley Cup can now easily be involved in over 100 games in a season to become champions.

The team that wins the Stanley Cup is publicly acknowledged to be the best team in the league that season. Even if they did not perform best during the long regular season, the winning of the Cup is a public statement about the moral character of the team. Winning the Stanley Cup renders a team Winners. And of course, hockey being a professional sport, winning the Stanley Cup once is an important aspect of the game but not the only one. When the New York Islanders won the Stanley Cup for the third time in successive seasons in 1982 they were declared by the media to be a ‘dynasty’. Their status as winners was clear and unequivocal. When the Calgary Flames won the Cup a few years later, and could not repeat the feat, a joke went around the NHL: How do they spell ‘dynasty’ in Calgary? ‘O—N—E’. Amusing for many, particularly those who follow hockey but do not support Calgary, the joke captures the sense of how character is made apparent through performances over time. No one disputed their winning of the Stanley Cup, but the one win was not enough to elevate the team above winners for that year.

While the Stanley Cup is awarded to the team that ends up as champion of the NHL for a season, the Cup itself is different in one respect from many other professional trophies. The Stanley Cup has continued to grow over the years as rounds are added beneath the silver bowl of the original trophy. In its own tradition, the names of all the players who played on the winning team in the final series are engraved on the Cup. It is not just teams that are made winners by this trophy, but individual players also share in the glory. There is a financial reward for winning the final series—and for playing in all the series leading up to it—but while money is ephemeral and fleeting, a name engraved on the trophy is there for the long run. Money can be spent or lost, but a name inscribed on the Cup will stay as long as the game is played. There remains a physical trace not just of the team that won in any particular year, but also of all the individual winning players who played in the final series.

It is almost unthinkable that a team could undeservedly win the Stanley Cup. The winning of the trophy is evidence that the team is the best. This can, of course, raise some interesting questions in the culture of the game. Sometimes a team may make a run for the Cup when they have had an average season. In 1982 the Vancouver Canucks played the New York Islanders for the Stanley Cup even though the Canucks had a record that put them in the bottom half of the league. As they made a most improbable run for the Stanley Cup the character of the Canucks had to be reassessed. They had an undistinguished record for the 1981/82 season and for every season they had been playing in the NHL since 1970. During their successful run in 1982 the Canucks were seen as a ‘Cinderella team’ in the playoffs. It is common enough for a team to play over its head and to perform for a time as though they could be successful. In identifying the Canucks with Cinderella the point was made that, if they were to be successful, it would have to mean that they really were that good. Just as Cinderella’s true royal genealogy was hidden and came out only when the prince fell in love with her, the Canucks would have had to be the best team during the season even if they spent most of among the ashes and hard domestic labour. After they had lost to the Islanders local journalists quickly produced an account of the

heady days of the 1982 playoffs (Gallagher & Gasher 1982). In it, and after the fact, they characterised the Canucks as winning but not winners.

In the culture of hockey, character as judgements about the moral worth of a player has a central role and it is against understandings of character that all accounts and interpretations are offered and judged. While specific ‘facts’ and figures may form the details in any discussion, they are used as ways of making sense of character. Just as any team may defeat any other team on any given night—perhaps an oversimplistic way of acknowledging the uncertainty of outcome and, hence, drama inherent in the sport—any player may perform in a variety of ways on any occasion. A good performance by a player who has not yet proven himself, or a bad performance by an acknowledged good player, do not necessarily reveal character. Character is only revealed through time. Hence, as one player is quoted at the top of this paper, ‘in the end they all count’. It is the aggregated statistics and performance over time that reveals character. With such understandings, it is not possible to say something more about the use of luck in the culture of hockey.

Luck: a conclusion

It is the seemingly contradictory nature of the use of luck in a sport that so emphasises rational calculation and hard work, in producing outcomes on the ice, that motivates the present paper. It is in this relationship that the dilemma at the heart of the dramatic nature of professional sport is most made apparent: it is an activity that is driven by rationality because of the money involved and yet the rational approach to action does not always work. In grounding a game in rational calculation, skill and hard work, how is it possible to explain outcomes on the ice where the best does not always win or where the unexpected performance by a player or team can produce a result that does not match calculated expectations? Where talent and hard work are required to make the NHL and to stay there, how can it be that those who provide interpretations of what takes place in play can have recourse to some notion of ‘luck’ in their accounts?

The notion of luck that appears in accounts of hockey that comprises the starting point for this analysis, but luck takes many different forms—indeed the creativity of the culture of the game precludes closure on how interpretations may be formulated. By taking luck as the conceptual starting point, as an interpretation that seems to question the very grounding of the professional game, the moral order of the game quickly becomes apparent. Luck has no meaning unless it is seen in relational terms to the moral understandings that are articulated and given shape through hockey. In providing an apparent disruption to the significance of this moral order I argue that luck draws attention to the importance of the underlying morality of the game. Hard work and talent may well provide the most enduring final vocabulary for explaining the outcomes of any season or career or the reputation of any club. However, along the way there is plenty of room for divergent understandings and alternative accounts. In the end, however, luck can only ever provide a short-term account, one that can be seen as part of a long campaign but not the determining feature of it. If one listens or reads carefully, and asks how any interpretation is possible, the underlying moral order of the game become more apparent even when not obviously present. Luck, and any of its guises, does not comprise a disjunction in the

cosmological ordering of the culture of hockey or the National Hockey League. Luck explains the unexpected by merely allowing that it was unexpected.

We may well have expectations but the game must be played for them to be realised or not. Luck seems to allow into accounts of the game more than just an element of chance. Outcomes may be achieved because some player or team may be seen as luckier than their opponent. But like luck chance does not really explain anything. It merely records that we did not expect this outcome. Luck seems to imply that there is something else at work. The large number of rituals and personal routines among players and others professionally involved with teams speaks to the presence of such beliefs. In the end, however, most will announce quite happily that ‘it all evens out in the end’ and that, it follows, the moral order of the game will assert itself over the long run. This belief itself reports that luck may make its presence felt—or at least we can interpret some action or outcome as due to luck—but that luck is not enough to win it all. In evening out at the end, we are left with a game organised so that talent, skill, discipline and hard work—character—will win out in the end. And in the end there is only one winner: the team that takes home the Stanley Cup, and is, by the culturally accepted understandings in the game, the best team in the league.

Luck, in all its various forms, as it is invoked in accounts of the NHL does not operate in isolation. It must be understood as depending upon moral understandings that go to the very heart of hockey. An account of luck may start with the unexpected, the apparently unexplainable, or the irrational, but in the end it is the culture of the game where its use must be grounded. Here, I have tried to show how we might accomplish this so that we understand not just luck but the moral context revealed through the agonistic competition of a commodified and professionalized sport such as hockey.

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POVZETEK

Pričujoči prispevek obravnava enega izmed pomembnih vidikov profesionalnega hokeja na ledu. Kljub temu, da je igra vseskozi postajala čedalje bolj komercializirana in racionalizirana ter organizirana na znanstvenih in ekonomskih postavkah, je pojem sreče še vedno prisoten v interpretaciji akcij in izidov tega športa. Ena izmed značilnosti besedišča motivov v hokeju je, da uporaba sreče dobi smisel takrat, ko postane konkretna manifestacija osnovnih moralnih razumevanj tistega, kar je v hokeju razumljivo in smiselno. Dejstvo, da je empirične uporabe sreče mogoče izpodbijati, kaže na prisotnost neke osnovne moralne logike igre, ki niso sistematizirane in zamejene, temveč prepustne, zgodovinske in odprtne za raznolike formulacije. Uporaba sreče v hokeju, kljub svoji sporadičnosti in naključnosti, dviguje racionalnost igre in ji omogoči, da se naseli v moralnem svetu, kjer najboljše ne zmaga vedno in kjer tudi najslabše vedno ne izgubi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: šport, sreča, motivi, izzivanje, profesionalnost, hokej