

In Search of... Hockeytown U.S.A.

With Detroit's claim to fame undermined by poor attendance at Red Wings games, SI set out to find the U.S. city that can rightfully call itself the capital of hockey in this country

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The year was 1996. The "Got Milk?" campaign was at its zenith, and a fast-food Mexican chain was about to introduce a wisecracking Chihuahua who would proclaim "Yo quiero Taco Bell." The advertising agency for the Detroit Red Wings, Bozell Worldwide, was also cooking up something that would capture the hockey zeitgeist as neatly as the Red Wings would the next two Stanley Cups.

"Hockeytown," which still graces the center-ice circle at Joe Louis Arena, remains a brilliant slogan, a motto so evocative that the Canadiens emulated it this season with "The city is hockey," evidence that Montreal has game if not syntax. Of course in Detroit in 2007 the Hockeytown moniker seems as appropriate as, well, dipping a beef taco in a glass of milk.

Detroit's Hockeytown crown has slipped. There were so many empty seats in The Joe during the playoffs last spring that you could have twirled an octopus in some rows of the upper deck and not slimed a soul. This year's home opener (against defending Stanley Cup champion Anaheim) was almost 2,500 short of a sellout. The Wings still offer dazzling hockey, showcasing three of the NHL's best 20 players -- Norris Trophy defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom and dynamic forwards Henrik Zetterberg and Pavel Datsyuk -- but ennui now grips the denizens of the down-at-the-heels arena. Despite the team's Western Conference-leading 18-6-2 record through Sunday attendance has continued to dip. This isn't a return to the Dead Things Era, when Detroit went to the playoffs just twice from 1967 through '83, but



While the Red Wings struggle to sell out, the Wild (above) is thriving thanks to grassroots hockey.

Darren Carroll/SI

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the Wings are clearly at the dawn of a new era. They have sold just 14,500 season tickets for their 20,066-seat rink this season.

"Coming in from the airport there was a billboard advertising Red Wings tickets," St. Louis Blues goalie coach Rick Wamsley says. "I don't think I've ever seen that."

There are scads of reasons for Hockeytown turning tepid, most notably a state economy that has lost more than 300,000 jobs since 2001. (Curiously, the economy seems better a few blocks away at Comerica Park, where the Tigers drew more than three million fans for the first time in '07, and in the suburbs where the Pistons have played to 100% of capacity in their 22,076-seat arena so far this year.)

"There are lots of things at work," Detroit general manager Ken Holland says. "Steve Yzerman retired [in '06], and there were people who were Steve Yzerman fans first and Red Wings fans second. We had a work stoppage [the '04-'05 lockout]. Maybe in Canada where hockey is part of the fabric you can pick right up where you left off, but here the bubble fans found other things to do. And we're fighting our own success. When we won the Cup in 2002, there were so many big names" -- Yzerman, Lidstrom, Brett Hull, Sergei Fedorov, Brendan Shanahan, Luc Robitaille, Igor Larionov -- "it's unlikely you'll ever see a team like that again in any [salary-capped] sport."

1 of 4

So while the Wings' Hockeytown tradition is running on fumes, you have to hit the road to find the new Hockeytown, starting with....

PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia Flyers enforcer Riley Cote and New York Rangers ruffian Colton Orr are throwing haymakers, a first-period fight so entrancing that the linesmen simply watch for 40 seconds as the sell-out crowd of 19,571 in the Wachovia Center on Nov. 15 roars its approbation. In Philadelphia this is mother's milk. The only thing better than hard-nosed hockey is broken-nosed hockey, the legacy of the Broad Street Bullies, who married skill with intimidation to win the Stanley Cup in 1974 and '75.

In modern NHL history, no Cups have ever Krazy-Glued a team to a town quite like those two. When then coach Fred Shero memorably said in the spring of 1974 that the Flyers would walk together forever if they won that first Cup, he neglected to mention that the city would be in lockstep with them. Although vitriol is supposedly the lifeblood of the Philadelphia sports fan, there is precious little directed at the Flyers, who have not won a Cup in 32 years and who last reached the final a decade ago. "Talk show hosts in this city criticize fans for not getting down on the Flyers the way they do on the Phillies, Eagles and Sixers," Flyers president Peter Luukko says. "I think that's because our fans feel they have ownership in the team."

Certainly they buy just as they buy-in. The Flyers are third in the league in attendance but claim to be first in what NHL people call "per caps" -- merchandise revenue divided by tickets sold. (When Philadelphia signed prized free agent center Daniel Brière, his number 48 jersey shot to the top of NHL merchandise sales in August.) The seats near the glass in Philly have always been crammed with fans in orange and now black jerseys, leaving the impression that opponents aren't playing against 20 Flyers but 200. Says goalie Martin



Rabid, color-coordinated fans make Philly rough on visitors.

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Biron, traded from the Buffalo Sabres to Philadelphia last spring, "This always has been the most intimidating building in the league."

If the postlockout rule changes have eroded any of the sport's soul in a city that loves its hockey chaotic -- "The game's become so sanitized it's hard to get that primal scream for it anymore," says Al Morganti, who does a Flyers postgame show on TV -- raw numbers don't reflect it. During a seven-day period in mid-November the Flyers and their minor league affiliate, the Phantoms, who play across the parking lot in the Spectrum (and are sixth in AHL attendance despite the NHL team's presence), each had three home games. Combined attendance: 78,046. "People don't come here to see the Ducks because they won the Stanley Cup," Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren says. "They come because the Ducks are playing the Flyers. It's always been like that." Indeed. Despite missing the playoffs five straight seasons in the early 1990s, the feckless Flyers sold out 94 of 202 home games in that stretch. And although the Flyers were the worst team in the NHL last season, they still played to 98.7% of capacity at the Wachovia Center.

Bob Clarke, the Flyers' senior vice president, stands up for his team's honor now almost as aggressively as he did as the star of the Broad Street Bullies. "When Detroit was bad [in the 1980s], the Red Wings couldn't put 3,000 in their building and they were giving away cars," he says. "Buffalo had to file for bankruptcy. St. Paul looks like a huge success [now], but Minneapolis was awful when the North Stars were there. [Clarke was the North Stars G.M. when the team reached the Cup final in 1991.] This is pro Hockeytown."

2 of 4

So the gauntlet is thrown down, just like Cote's overhand left.

BUFFALO

Three doors lead into HSBC Arena, each topped with a frieze. The ones above the left and right doors depict goalies making sprawling glove saves; stampeding buffalo adorn the center. Almost all of the 18,690 people who will see the Sabres thump Montreal 4-1 on this night stream through those doors and mill about the lobby, creating a charged pregame atmosphere. In an era in which almost any game is available on TV or the Internet, the best reason to buy a ticket is the sense of community it offers, a chance to spend three hours with people who have shared values and shared expectations. With the teeming lobby, the Sabres offer a game and a hockey town-hall meeting.

"Last year some of our people thought we should call ourselves America's Team on Ice," says Sabres managing partner Larry Quinn two hours before the opening face-off against the Canadiens on Nov. 16. "I mean, if we're not Hockeytown, who is? But we said, let's win one or two Cups first before we start with that. I can't imagine throwing something on the ice to call attention to ourselves. It just doesn't seem like Buffalo. It seems more like Dallas."



Youth hockey on a downtown rink is as essential to St. Paul as the Wild and Gaborik (right).

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Still, the Sabres indulged in some self-congratulation in October, when they publicized a Scarborough Research survey that said Buffalo had the NHL's most loyal fans: 28.9% of males and 21.6% of females

responded that they were very or somewhat interested in the team. (In Philadelphia 12.7% of men and 7.5% of women fit that category.)

Four years after owner Tom Golisano rescued the Sabres from bankruptcy -- part of the fallout from the fraud conviction of former owner John Rigas, founder of Adelphia Communications -- the revival has been stunning. "I had friends with season tickets who couldn't give them away," says Brière, an ex-Sabre. But now, helped in part by a cut in prices, the season ticket base is at 14,800, up from 6,200 at its nadir. Even though fewer than 1,000 seats in HSBC Arena are purchased by corporations, Buffalo sold every available ticket last season and will likely do the same in 2007-08.

This is mom-and-pop hockey, supported by people who, in Quinn's estimation, spend more of their disposable income on hockey than fans in any other city. Says Sabres equipment manager Rip Simonick, who was with the team when it entered the league 37 years ago, "This is a small city, shrinking before our eyes" -- according to the 2006 census, there were about 180,000 more people in Buffalo in 1970 than today's 276,059 -- "but people here appreciate that hockey is a hard, physical game. You work for every dollar here. If you give an effort, the fans will always be there for you."

It is no accident that the NHL chose Buffalo to be the site of the league's first outdoor game in the U.S. The Sabres will host the Penguins at Ralph Wilson Stadium, 10 miles from downtown, on New Year's Day. The 41,000 tickets made available to the public sold out in a half hour.

"There's a trauma here, with so many people's kids having moved out of town," Quinn says. "Sports for a Buffalo person is an outlet to fight back against that trauma. It's almost like a cause. For a lot of people Sabres tickets are what they do instead of taking vacations. I ask people, 'How can you afford it?' They say, 'Well, we go to 40 games instead of going to Florida, and we don't take a summer vacation.' "

"In some ways," G.M. Darcy Regier says, "this is like small-town Canada."

3 of 4

Exactly. And Buffalo is a little too much small-town Canada to qualify as Hockeytown U.S.A. Only 8% of the Sabres' season-ticket base is Canadian, but on any given night a fifth of the Buffalo crowd has braved Peace Bridge customs' checks and come from eh-droppin' southern Ontario. Filling the building with imports is like setting a wind-aided world record.

ST. PAUL

In the pregame darkness of the sold-out arena, a child bathed in a spotlight's amber glow skates to center ice and plants a Minnesota Wild flag. This simple gesture guarantees the Wild a nightly goose-bump moment -- one that's a nod to the essence of hockey in the city that has become the game's epicenter. Unlike in, say, Philadelphia, hockey in St. Paul grows from the bottom up. When the child plants that Wild flag at the Xcel Energy Center, says Les Larson, director of development for college hockey's Hobey Baker Award, "it's about hockey moms driving to the rink, the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich a kid grabs before going to play, about the pickup games guys played. It strikes a chord."

The Wild has sold every ticket to every game since it entered the NHL as an expansion team in 2000, but it has never tried to bigfoot hockey in a city that was home to America's iconic coach, Herb Brooks; the No. 2 U.S.-born career NHL scorer, South St. Paul's Phil Housley; the only cartoonist to draw a Zamboni-driving bird, Charles Schulz; and the leading state high school tournament in the nation. This is the unwritten hockey schedule in the Twin Cities: boys' hockey Tuesday night, girls' hockey Thursday night, the University of Minnesota Friday and Saturday nights. Boys and girls also play on Saturday afternoon. It is no coincidence

that the Wild often plays on Wednesday and Sunday. This is a franchise respectful of the game, aware of its niche and almost obsequious in its treatment of fans. Minnesota high school hockey jerseys ring the outer concourse of the arena. Pictures of season-ticket holders appear on game tickets. The Wild even employs a full-time hockey curator to protect and promote the state's hockey heritage.

"This reminds me of Calgary when I first went there," says G.M. Doug Risebrough, who played in the NHL for 13 years and was traded from Montreal to Calgary in 1982. "They'd just gotten the franchise [in '80], and there was the same sort of enthusiasm, a feeling of, let's grow up together."

The lingering question: How can any Hockeytown aspirant have lost an NHL team, as the Twin Cities, the 15th largest T.V. market in the U.S., did when owner Norm Green took the North Stars to Dallas in 1993? Those North Stars did, as Clarke suggested, have attendance problems -- but those were precipitated in large part by an ownership that alienated the fan base. The team played its games in Bloomington, and Green complained bitterly about not being able to play in downtown Minneapolis at the Target Center. Fans were also put off by a high profile sexual harassment suit that Green ended up settling out of court. Attendance shriveled to just 7,838 per game in 1990-91 and Green called it quits two seasons later, moving to the virgin territory of the southwest.

Now Minnesotans are buying what the Wild is selling. Season tickets are capped at 16,500; the waiting list is 7,500. There are 32 stations on the team's radio network, extending through the Dakotas, into Iowa and Wisconsin and even Thunder Bay, Ont. NHL hockey again appears entrenched, despite the many other options available.

"If you aren't happy with the pro team," says Wild assistant coach Mike Ramsey, who is from Minneapolis and played for the University of Minnesota, "you say, 'I'm going to a high school game. I'm going to see the [Minnesota] Gophers. I'm going to St. Cloud [State, a Division I program an hour from the Twin Cities].'"

What further sets a Buffalo-sized city apart from, say, Buffalo, is its growth potential. Mark Jorgensen, executive director of Minnesota Hockey, which oversees the game at the amateur level in the state, says girls' hockey, which accounted for 14.6% of youth players in 1998-99, is up to 21.5%.

"If you go to a rink now, there's a good chance there'll be girls on the ice," Risebrough says. "Years from now I think you'll find lots of mothers with their sons and daughters at our games because this is what they did."

Expect no less in St. Paul, America's new Hockeytown.