

THE WELFARE LOTTERY

"Welfare increases may ... show that years of 30-per-cent high-school dropout rates are catching up with Ontario."

— Commentary, A15

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SPORT / Pity the poor Canadian hockey fan in New York during the Stanley Cup playoffs. He longs to join his friends in a bar and watch the big games on the big-screen TV. Not in the Big Apple. Hockey here is small potatoes

Lonely worshipper at a rite of spring

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
New York

IN most things, I've found New York City is the centre of it all. It takes the sting out of homesick pangs by providing something for everybody — ethnic food of all peoples, cultural events for every culture, museums celebrating societies the world over. As a Canadian in the United States, I've travelled throughout this country and always feel closer to home in New York than anywhere else.

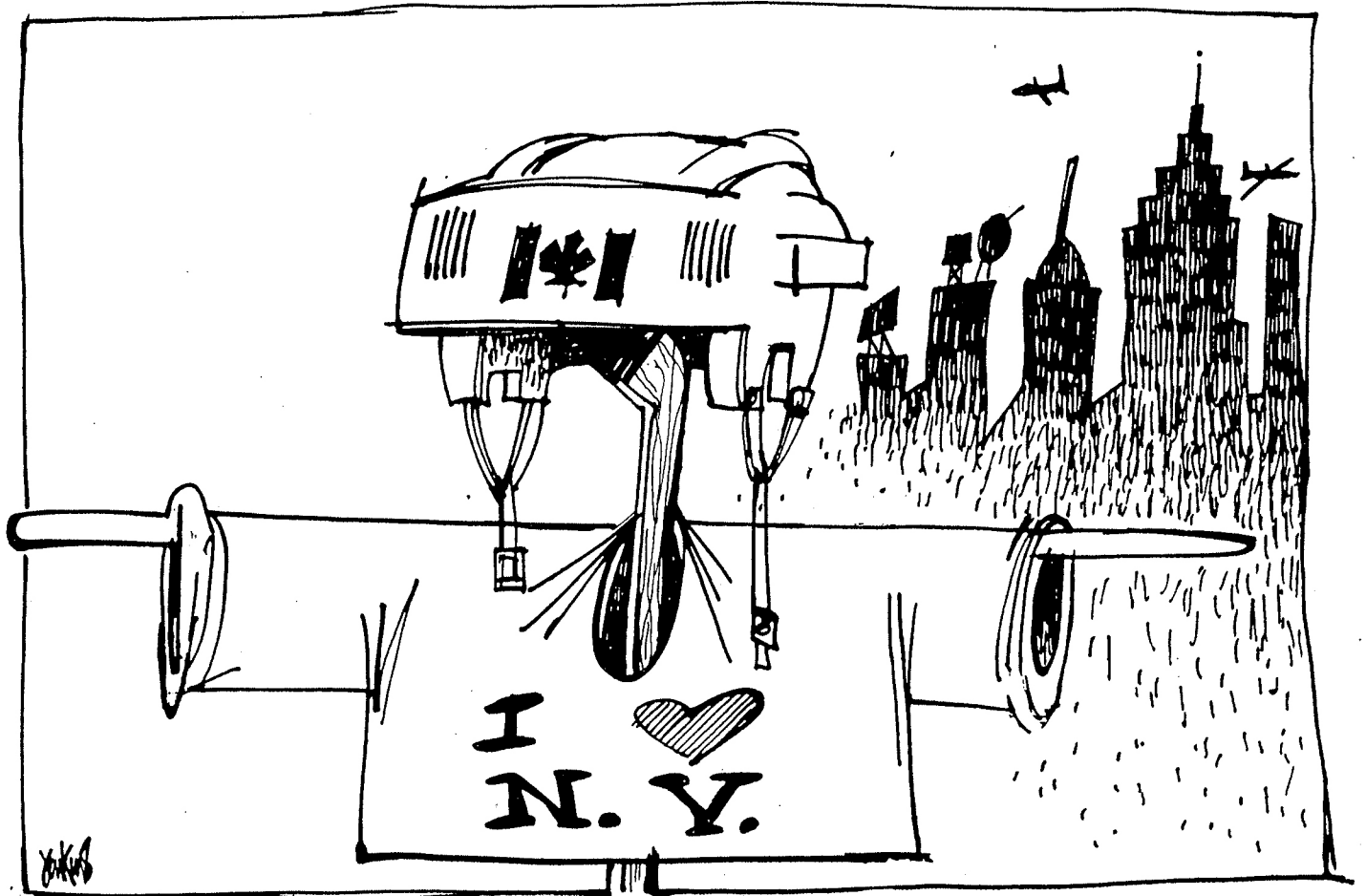
Except, of course, from mid-April to mid-May. In springtime, hockey watching moves underground.

Like most Canadians I know, for one month a year — at Stanley Cup playoff time — I long to watch hockey. Last year I spent the spring in Santa Fe, so I didn't follow the games very closely, and my American wife commented on my darkening mood as days passed. As it happens, my wife's birthday usually falls on a game date of the Stanley Cup finals, and last year I was taxed to the limit to appear cheerful and loving. Once, we visited a friend with a satellite dish, and when he was switching through channels I saw an attack by the Edmonton Oilers. I experienced such an adrenalin rush that I thought for a moment I'd heard Foster Hewitt's voice.

So, given such a disappointment last year, I was looking forward this year to being back in New York. I called a Canadian friend and said we would meet for a game at a sports bar. In North Bay, I had watched the big screen with friends from work, and I'd thought a similar outing could be had here.

The date chosen, I called the New York Times sports desk and asked for a hockey reporter whose name I had seen. An editor on the sports desk said the hockey reporters weren't available to talk, that they didn't come in until later. I asked if he knew where the game featuring the Pittsburgh Penguins would be televised. (The Penguins have been my favourite team since I learned that an uncle of mine had lent his goal skates to an aspiring young goaltender from Walkerton, Ont. — Les Binkley — who later went on to be their first expansion goalie.) He said he didn't know, was from New Jersey and had to leave soon to beat the traffic.

Next, I called Madison Square Garden. Jody at the office of the New York



ANTHONY JENKINS

Rangers said finding a gathering of hockey fans in Manhattan with the three local teams eliminated was going to be difficult, but that sports channels do carry the games. She suggested two sports bars near "The Garden," emphasizing the singular. (She said it was a dead giveaway of my Canadian roots that I called it at first "The Gardens.") I phoned my friend, and prepared to go.

When I arrived, my friend was already at the sports bar. Music videos played in its four corners. It had pictures of Bobby Orr and sports promoter Don King side by side, did not broadcast any sports, and was to close at 8 p.m. So we gathered our things and went outside near Pennsylvania Station. The air smelled of urine and roasted chestnuts as we wandered into the second tavern that the Rangers had recommended. We were five minutes before game time and the waitress said the two small-screen televisions would show the Mets game and a hockey game.

Two businessmen in dark suits were at the bar. We took the table closest to the Penguins' TV set and watched as the cherubic face of Gerry Cheevers, ex-Bruin goalie and now a broadcaster for a cable network, stared out at us. I remembered games that he had played, the

excitement of those years. We were both smiling, my friend and I, as we looked about us, instinctively, half-expecting other compatriots to come through the door and line up chairs in front of the set so that together we would watch the Stanley Cup playoffs. But the only other customers were the businessmen, who talked of new bond issues and rising profits and never lifted their heads toward the game, even when I cheered loudly and long as Pittsburgh took the lead. They left early in the third.

I ENJOYED talking to my friend about work, wives, memories and dreams, but I kept looking for others to join us. Another man came in as the game was winding down, but he was not a fan. He stared blankly at the set, rising to go to the restroom as a power play began, going to the public telephone during a goalmouth scramble.

At the siren — when a Penguin put the game on ice with a puck in the empty net — four burly guys from the crew of the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus bellied up to the bar. They were dressed in red and yellow cloth jackets with tigers on the backs. One looked up at the game. "Thank God the Rangers are out" was all he said about hockey as

they turned to discuss the tensile strength of the tightrope and finding a Czech-made spare part for the performing bear's motorcycle.

The next day I called Jody and told her I was disappointed with the places she had recommended. Surely there were others? She said it was the best I could expect, and added that it was a good thing that basketball playoffs had not started in earnest. Then fans would be hard-pressed to find any TV hockey in public places at all.

"If it were the World Series or the Super Bowl, people would be getting together and going crazy at sports bars," she said. "It's not like Canada. ... Hockey really is sort of a cult following down here."

Still, my friend and I have not given up. We've put together about 40 copies of a sheet that reads: HOCKEY FANS SEEKING SAME WITH CABLE TV. WILL BRING BEER. (MOLSONS OR LABATT'S.) PLEASE CALL. My phone number is on tabs, and we've tacked the sheets to telephone poles along the route to the subway. We're waiting for the phone to ring.

Larry O'Connor is working on a book about his travels in the United States.

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