

CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | The sunbelt now officially dominates the NHL. What a shame

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Florida Panthers center Sam Bennett screams after scoring a goal during the third period of Game 4 of a Stanley Cup playoffs second round series against the Toronto Maple Leafs on May 11 at Amerant Bank Arena in Sunrise, Florida. Florida, the defending Stanley Cup champs, defeated the Leafs in seven games and reached the Eastern Conference finals for the third straight year.

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By Timothy Dewhirst Contributor

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There's been a lot of talk that the Stanley Cup is long overdue to return to Canada. A Canadian-based NHL team [has not won the Stanley Cup since 1993](#).

Five of Canada's seven NHL teams qualified for the playoffs this year. But after two rounds, the Edmonton Oilers are Canada's only remaining representative. Meanwhile, the other semifinalists — the Florida Panthers, Carolina Hurricanes, and Dallas Stars — are "sunbelt" teams.

The late-season representation of sunbelt teams is becoming increasingly familiar. The Panthers are the defending Stanley Cup champions, while the Vegas Golden Knights won the previous season.

After beating the Maple Leafs in Game 7, the Panthers are playing in their third successive Eastern Conference final. The Stars, after eliminating the Winnipeg Jets, are competing in their third successive Western Conference final.

The prominence of sunbelt teams reflects the direction of NHL commissioner, Gary Bettman. He's been at the helm for more than 30 years.

The Minnesota North Stars became the Dallas Stars in 1993, whereas the Hurricanes relocated from Hartford in 1997. The Panthers, the NHL's southernmost team, played their inaugural season during 1993-1994. Anaheim was another NHL expansion team commencing that season.

When Bettman came on board as commissioner in February 1993, there were four divisions in the NHL that each consisted of six teams. Under Bettman's watch, the number of NHL teams has expanded to 32. New teams also included those in Nashville and Arizona. Arizona's team was relocated from Winnipeg. They have since become the Utah Mammoth. The Quebec Nordiques, meanwhile, were relocated to Colorado.

During Bettman's initial months at the helm, the Montreal Canadiens were the Stanley Cup champions. A Canadian team has not won the championship since.

The NHL has historically been more heavily dependent on gate revenue than the other major professional sports leagues. Attendance figures tend to be impressive for Canada's NHL teams, but the drive toward having franchises in non-traditional U.S. locations is powered by the size of media markets and seeking ever more lucrative television contracts.

Bettman's primary function — as commissioner — is to enhance revenue among the teams' owners and to increase the worth of NHL teams. By such a measure, Bettman has clearly excelled. According to the latest valuations by Forbes, the average NHL team's value has been escalating, reaching \$1.9 billion in 2024.

Still, attaining brand awareness and recognition for NHL sunbelt teams has proved challenging. Two years ago, [NBA superstar LeBron James showed confusion](#) about where the NHL's Kings franchise is located. He thought the team was based in Las Vegas rather than Los Angeles, even though the Kings and Lakers — the team James plays for — share the same home arena.

The legacy of moving NHL teams to sunbelt locations is mixed. By Forbes' estimations, the Arizona Coyotes were the least valuable NHL team before their relocation to Utah. If there is further expansion, Houston, Kansas City, or Atlanta (for a third time!) is more probable than another Canadian location being nominated.

Despite these developments, the brand name "National Hockey League" reflects the league's origins when there were once only four teams, [which were all situated in Canada](#). And while the NHL head office was previously based in Montreal, these days it is in New York. Hockey remains central to Canadian culture and identity, but Canadian representation is apparently declining in the NHL.

When the Stanley Cup final games are played during the month of June, the locations of games — and time of year — aren't suggestive of “winter sport” and “ice hockey.”

“We the south” might become a common refrain for the NHL's Stanley Cup champions. In the meantime, let's go Oilers.

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