



# MADE IN AMERICA

## THE BLUE JAYS LAND IN TORONTO, APRIL 1977

In 1977, Toronto embarked on the ambitious project of bringing baseball to the Great White North. So eager was Hogtown to host baseball, that, having settled for a subpar stadium, city leaders took care to spell out the game's rules, lingo, and mathematics to the newspaper-reading public, hoping to convert thousands of Torontonians into baseball's first Canadian fanbase. The trappings of baseball culture in the States were an integral part of the move—from the songs to the drinks in the stands—all of which became incorporated into a new synthesis of baseball and Canadian culture. Graham Ambrose, BR '18, colorfully captures the Toronto Blue Jays' thrilling first season and popular success. Visiting the machinators behind baseball's rise to success as well as public's reactions, the following pages are an immersive look into the pastime's often-surprising first years in Canada.

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Toronto alderman George Ben had earned a reputation for sternness. A veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> Ben exhibited little patience for the more frivolous ventures of the Toronto City Council. Across fifteen years in public service, few such ventures proved more frivolous to the Spartan, Slovakian-born lawyer<sup>2</sup> than the arrival of Major League Baseball in Toronto. “I have no desire to go into never-never land,” the councilman said, “and join Peter Pan at the ballpark.”<sup>3</sup>

After years of talks, stalls and setbacks, negotiation and compromise, in April of 1977 the newly-minted Toronto Blue Jays were to become the second professional baseball team – after the Montreal Expos began play in 1969<sup>4</sup> – to call Canada home. All across Toronto, Ontario and greater English-speaking Canada, the Blue Jays represented a new outlet for entertainment, an exciting albeit imperfect entry-point into a favorite cultural avocation of Yankee Land.

Yet below the hype, the arrival of the Blue Jays in the spring of 1977 brought to the fore a farrago of responses from politicians, community leaders, sports officials, and everyday Torontonians, many of whom saw the importation of America’s pastime as a distraction from Canada’s unique cultural identity. Alderman Ben represented one vocal leader of such critics.

The motivations that brought 44,649 people<sup>5</sup> to the first-ever Blue Jays game at Exhibition Park on April 7, 1977 varied. Some sought simple entertainment, others a means of escapism. Many wanted to participate in “history.”<sup>6</sup> Some came out of a deep-seated love of the game, while others used the occasion for political pageantry, purportedly responding to a sense of “civic duty.”<sup>7</sup> The story of those spectators, of the men and women who campaigned to bring the Major Leagues to Toronto, and of that fateful first contest on a blizzardy Thursday in early April captured like few moments in modern Canadian history the dynamic, oftentimes haphazard playing out of an extra-Canadian import within a uniquely Canadian milieu.

Like the tale of Peter Pan and “never-never land,” baseball in Canada represented a mythical attraction often more story than substance. Yet the game that began as a foreign commodity underwent a distinctly Canadian process of domestication. By the end of the Toronto Blue Jays’ first game on April 7, 1977, baseball had begun to shed its exotic quality in English-speaking Canada. Just fifteen years after that portentous first baseball game at Exhibition Stadium, the American national pastime would be Canadianized.

Years before Toronto welcomed the Blue Jays in April of 1977, visionaries of the game had begun scheming to found a permanent Major Leagues outpost in the 416. Just a decade before the Blue Jays were to arrive in Toronto, the city lost its only professional ball club when the Maple Leafs, a Triple-A Minor League franchise playing in the International League, moved to Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>8</sup> By the end of 1967, after more than eighty years of professional ball in Toronto, Canadian baseball was declared dead.<sup>9</sup>

But over the next twenty months, an unexpected series of events outside Metropolitan Toronto buoyed the floundering dream of baseball in Canada – most significantly, the entrance of the Montreal Expos into the National League in 1969. To Torontonians’ shock, their city had not merely been snubbed as the capital of Canadian baseball, but snubbed by longtime historic rival Montreal, a French satellite city many Anglophones had blithely assumed to be more attentive to European fashion than to American athletics.

The arrival of the Expos sent Toronto into “an absolute frenzy of envy.”<sup>10</sup> For the next seven years, private residents and public officials continually campaigned to host a Major League franchise. Already Toronto boasted, and flaunted, numerous assets attractive to a professional team: wealth, sports-loving citizens, and a populous surrounding area.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite its proud history of baseball and its sizable fan base readily seeking a new mascot to cherish, Toronto lacked the basic infrastructure needed to support a team – most importantly of all, a ballpark. The absence was not merely incidental; securing a permanent venue proved make-or-break to the decision-makers at Major League Baseball. Bowie Kuhn, then MLB Commissioner, laid out the league’s simple prerequisite for admission to early Toronto hopefuls: “First, you provide a major league baseball park up there in Toronto, and then we’ll see about a franchise.”<sup>12</sup> After the demolition of Maple Leaf Stadium in 1968,<sup>13</sup> Toronto had nowhere to house a team. But equipped with the wisdom made famous by Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* – “if you build it, he will come”<sup>14</sup> – champions of Toronto baseball creatively maneuvered to materialize a stadium and realize the contingent dream of baseball in Toronto.

Ambitious proponents of baseball like Paul Godfrey, Chairman of Metropolitan Toronto, wanted to build a state-of-the-art domed stadium fit for a world-class sports franchise.<sup>15</sup> But no officials from the Metro, province, or federal government were willing to lend the needed funds to construct a new stadium.<sup>16</sup> “The best Godfrey could hope for,” said Canadian sportswriter Stephen Brunt, “was to somehow retrofit Exhibition Stadium so that it might accommodate both football and baseball.”<sup>17</sup>

The result was a compromise that left few parties happy. The modified Exhibition Stadium, retrofitted to support a new baseball club alongside the extant Argonauts – a professional football team – was calamitous. “Wrigley Field it wasn’t,”<sup>18</sup> Brunt stated diplomatically. Godfrey himself conceded the shortcomings to a reproachful Toronto press. “It’s in the wrong location. It’s got terrible sight lines. There’s going to be a terrible traffic mess,” he said.<sup>19</sup> The finished stadium, with an official capacity just over 43,000,<sup>20</sup> became known as “the mistake by the lake.”<sup>21</sup> “It wasn’t just the worst stadium in baseball,” said former Blue Jays and later Major League Baseball President Paul Beeston, “it was the worst stadium in sports. But it was ours, and we were quite proud of it.”<sup>22</sup>

The refurbished Exhibition Stadium cost \$15 million<sup>23</sup> and a generation of dis-

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contented fans. But the effort ultimately proved fruitful. When the American League voted to expand in 1976, Toronto, along with Seattle, submitted a winning bid.<sup>24</sup> “They took a bad football stadium and they made it a worse baseball stadium,” said one high-level Blue Jays executive speaking with anonymity.<sup>25</sup> “But if they hadn’t built the stadium, there’s no way there would have been a team.” After seven years, baseball was returning to the Queen City.<sup>26</sup>

As a cultural import in Canada, baseball represented a small but significant pivot toward the United States. Toronto, endearingly dubbed “Hollywood North”<sup>27</sup> in honor of the city’s renowned entertainment centers, wanted to round out a recreational repertoire dominated by hockey and the Canadian Football League, a successful yet ultimately regional enchantment. Don McDougall, a local businessman who helped lead the campaign to bring the Blue Jays to Toronto, saw in baseball an opportunity for cultural transformation. “Baseball is going to be bigger than ever,” he predicted. “It has to do with the social climate these days...I see the 1980s in Canada as being beer, baseball, and the Conservative Party.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet by early 1977, Toronto faced a major roadblock to fulfilling its fledgling dream of pitching a successful ball club: Canadians. Despite antecedents dating back to the late-nineteenth century, baseball remained largely unknown to residents of the True North outside all but a few pockets. Canadian ignorance of the game was immortalized in a twenty-four-page Opening Day supplemental published by the Toronto Star on April 6, 1977, just a few short hours before the first pitch at Exhibition Stadium. The special insert touched all bases, from a lengthy summary on baseball’s Toronto homecoming to a detailed look at the ’77 squad to photo collages that documented the team’s star pitchers and sluggers.

To welcome beginners to the sport, the Star printed the full lyrics to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” including two verses largely ignored by Americans on “Nelly Kelly, a girl well ahead of her time, and her passion for baseball.”<sup>29</sup> For the more arithmetic-savvy fans, or those with an already-respectable grip on the sport, the supplement included a digest on “The Mathematics of Baseball.”<sup>30</sup> Canadian fans could thus appreciate the game for a reason Americans did not—with an understanding of statistics. Star sports columnist Neil MacCarl even penned a primer on the rules of the sport, writing to a lay audience no more familiar with baseball than “an immigrant [just] off the ship.”<sup>31</sup> The comparison revealed how many Canadians like Alderman George Ben saw baseball as an import from “never-never land,” a little-understood foreign commodity transplanted onto alien soil.

Yet perhaps no aspect of the supplemental more acutely reflected contemporary Canada than the inclusion of a comprehensive wordbook of terms, which the editors described as a “baseball glossary that glosses over nothing, from ‘Banjo Hit’ to ‘the Seventh

Inning Stretch.”<sup>32</sup> The terse dictionary defined over seventy phrases, expressions, and key-words central to the game, from the strike zone (“the space over home plate which is between the batter’s armpits and the top of his knees when he assumes his natural stance”<sup>33</sup>) to the bunt (“the batter lightly taps or shoves the ball with the bat, rather than swinging”<sup>34</sup>). Small cartoonish caricatures accompanied some of the more peculiar terms, lending lighthearted, comic imagery to the unfamiliar vocabulary.

The glossary carried significant practical and symbolic value. Beyond offering newcomers an easily accessible avenue into the sport, the wordlist represented an act of translation, and one in a nation hyperconscious of linguistic divisions. But unlike the usual acts of translation common to metropolitan Canada—namely, between English and French—the *Star* baseball glossary performed a translation from American English into local English-Canadian parlance. Indeed, the inclusion stood as a testament to the importance of language, both for a sport as old and storied as baseball—where the linguistics matter to diehard fans in equal measure to the “mathematics”—and also for English-speaking Canada, where one’s patterns of speech dictate much of daily life and convey important aspects of identity. To the Canadian editors at the *Toronto Star*, correcting for cultural ignorance first necessitated bridging the linguistic divide via the shared language of baseball.

Bridging that divide, though, inherently required Canadians to cross over onto American soil. Indeed, the glossary, primer on rules, summative history of Canadian baseball, and season previews evidenced the extent to which Toronto had its eyes on America during the birth of the Blue Jays—and for more than mere semantics. In fact, though commentators correctly noted the role that the Montreal Expos played in abetting Toronto demands for a ball club, many misidentify the true exemplar framing the Blue Jays’ early dreams: the New York Yankees. For though the Expos provided the key spark of inspiration that spurred leaders in Toronto to action, the Yankees represented the true aspiration of the Blue Jays—the former a legendary Major League titan, perennially in contention for the pennant; the latter a fledgling flock of expansion team neophytes and misfits<sup>35</sup> with a promising future and no past. One article included in the insert, aptly titled “The Yankee Mystique,” set out to examine the Bronx Bombers’ illustrious history, strategy, and brand to learn how to build a “dynasty”<sup>36</sup> the New York way. “How have they succeeded where others have failed?”<sup>37</sup> As an expansion league team yet to play its first game, the Blue Jays’ dreams of dynasty were still embryonic. League rules essentially prevented Toronto and Seattle from acquiring major talent their first years.<sup>38</sup> Still, the Yankee model proved highly influential. When picking management for the early franchise, Blue Jays executives tried, with some success, to handpick names from the New York payroll.<sup>39</sup> Just as the Yankees typified an image of American boldness, of success in the Big Apple, of Pax Americana, so too did the Blue Jays strive to build a “strong, aggressive...gutsy and good looking”<sup>40</sup> im-

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age to personify the city of Toronto and, more ambitiously, all of Canada.

Emblematic of the trajectory that professional sports had taken in America, the twenty-four-page supplement was also replete with advertisements. Companies near and far wasted little time cashing in on the lucrative new market opened by baseball advertising. Canadian whiskey,<sup>41</sup> sneakers,<sup>42</sup> cigarettes,<sup>43</sup> personal radios,<sup>44</sup> baseball equipment<sup>45</sup> and apparel all landed coveted ad space, some even for a full page. If money was the language of America, Canadian companies were picking up conversational proficiency.

One business, though, had already gained fluency: Labatt, a Canadian brewery and partial owner of the Blue Jays, famous for producing a distinctive Pilsner Lager widely known in Canada as “Blue.” Labatt’s Blue occupied a full-page ad on the Star supplement’s back page,<sup>46</sup> the choicest real estate for product marketing. The placement was no mere coincidence. After the new baseball franchise had announced their move to Toronto, Labatt began advertising the drink heavily. Many even accused the brewery of using the franchise as a public relations tool to market their product.<sup>47</sup> After all, as a partial owner, Labatt played a central role in naming the team. “It was assumed that the naming was just a cheap advertising ploy, a way of subliminally making people think of a cold Labatt product when they thought about the baseball team,” said Stephen Brunt. “Fans might even call them the Blues for short, rather than the Jays” and unconsciously associate Labatt’s signature drink with the beloved baseball club.<sup>48</sup>

The charge held water. The name’s champion within the club, Art Lennox, worked full-time as national director of advertising for Labatt.<sup>49</sup> When the Star ran an unrelated profile of Labatt president Don McDougall in January of 1977 – the man who, with transparent motivations, had earlier predicted that beer and baseball would be centerpieces of 1980s Canadian life – the newspaper took for common knowledge that the brewery executive “set out to bring baseball to Toronto [because] his company badly needed a sports image to fight the beer competition.”<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, of the thirty thousand entries submitted to the club’s naming contest, not “Blue Jays” but “Maple Leafs” earned the most submissions, and by a hefty margin.<sup>51</sup> Still, “Blue Jays,” the only candidate submitted as a finalist by the committee nominated to select the moniker, became the team’s official name, much to the chagrin of Torontonians. “Who’d believe a ball team called ‘Dingbats?’”<sup>52</sup> ran one headline in mid-1976. Fans were even less enthused. “That’s not what they are going to call the team, are they?”<sup>53</sup> asked Jack Gorrill, chairman of Little League baseball in Metro Toronto. “It lacks appeal to me.”<sup>54</sup> The only support came from team executives and, expectedly, environmentalists like Ron Thorpe, president of the Toronto Field Naturalists Club. “It’s a super idea,” Thorpe said. “It just goes to show how much people are more environmentally oriented than they used to be.”<sup>55</sup> In the estimation of critics, “Blue Jays” as the official brand all but assured Labatt’s Blue would be the team’s official drink.

But “Toronto the Good”<sup>56</sup> would not have it. The city, which did not fully legalize liquor sales until the early 2000s,<sup>57</sup> announced that alcohol would not be permitted to be sold at Exhibition Stadium by Opening Day, 1977. Fans protested loudly and frequently. In the months leading up to the first game, the Toronto Star received hundreds of letters on the status of beer at the ballpark. Many, like David Elms of Willowdale, asked for compassion. “C’mon, government. When are you going to start letting the common man enjoy his humble little life? Beer served in a paper cup for a half a buck? All in favor say aye!”<sup>58</sup>

Canadians were not just in favor of beer—they were in favor of beer just as Americans had it. “I’ve attended many games in the States,” Elms added, “and I didn’t find one stadium that did not serve nice cold draft beer.”<sup>59</sup> Don Phillips of Toronto lambasted the ban’s discordance with the public. “Consumer Relations Minister Sidney Handleman discounts recent surveys which show overwhelming approval for beer sales,”<sup>60</sup> he said. To voters like Phillips, the decision “demonstrates the man’s contempt for voters of this province.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed the beer ban was more than a damper on recreation—it was an affront to a sacred cultural pastime, however foreign and novel that pastime might have been.

For their part, local officials indicated some plasticity, particularly as Opening Day approached. “The door is still open,”<sup>62</sup> said Ontario Attorney General Roy McMurtry hours before the first pitch of the franchise opener. McMurtry, who brought milk to the game,<sup>63</sup> said the provincial policy banning beer was not “the final answer.”<sup>64</sup> On April 6, the day before the opener, the Metro Council voted 21-11 in favor of amending the Liquor Control Act and bringing beer to Exhibition as part of a six-month trial.<sup>65</sup> But according to Liberal Party leaders, the vote was only preliminary to “show the party’s commitment to the issue”;<sup>66</sup> a full vote from the Council would not arrive until the next legislative session. Opposition leader Stephen Lewis expressed support for the proposed bill though still remarked that “this issue is the silliest thing I have had to deal with in years.”<sup>67</sup> “I have given it my time,” he added, “about three seconds of it.”<sup>68</sup>

Fans would have to wait for their beer. In the meantime, the delay was not well received. When Metro Chairman Paul Godfrey welcomed the Jays to City Hall in an Opening Day ceremony, one boisterous fan in the crowd of 1,500 interrupted: “it’s going to take seven more years to get beer at the park.”<sup>69</sup> Team manager Roy Hartsfield soberly thanked the crowd for the enthusiastic welcome, then promptly exited.<sup>70</sup> He had a ballgame to play.

The Toronto spring did little to help. In true Canadian fashion, Opening Day brought down a particularly “hellish”<sup>71</sup> cocktail of the elements onto the ballfield: a thick snow, heavy wind, and knee-bucklingly low temperatures that hovered around freezing

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through the late afternoon into the night. “Happiness,” declared an Opening Day headline in the *Star*, “is baseball and a warm blanket.”<sup>72</sup> *Star* fashion writer Stasia Evasuk, in an entire article devoted to the anticipated weather, warned fans to wear layers and to avoid conditions that could lead to frostbite.<sup>73</sup> “Baseball was meant to be played in the glorious summer sunshine,” said Evasuk, “but the Toronto Blue Jays are starting in the cold,”<sup>74</sup> an environment more local than American. If Torontonians held anxieties about appropriating America’s national pastime, the brutish late Canadian winter intervened to dispel any notions that baseball in Canada would be a mere facsimile of the game in the States.

Few weather-induced variables proved as important to the unique character of Exhibition Stadium as the wind. Because of the stadium’s haphazard retrofitting, poorly-designed structural gaps existed throughout the stands, most perceptibly in left field where the old football bleachers met the new baseball seats. The opening created a perfect wind tunnel, which blew air left to right across the field. For the next twelve years, until 1989 when the Blue Jays moved to the SkyDome, Exhibition Stadium would come to be known as a left-handed hitter’s ballpark.<sup>75</sup> With even a meager wind, fly balls to right field would float far and deep over the fence onto the adjacent AstroTurf. Exposition Stadium’s right field quickly developed a reputation as “the favourite of every power hitter in the American League.”<sup>76</sup> The wind proved so influential in the early days of Exhibition Stadium that the team was forced to practice with unorthodox tools to train players to account for the wind factor. The week before the season opener, coach Don Leppert used his personal bazooka gun to fire fly balls into the outfield.<sup>77</sup> Players were adapting to Canadian weather in real time.

By Opening Day, that grisly Toronto weather had become a frequent talking point for the press, and a sticking point for the players – but not a point of contention for Blue Jays devotees. 44,649 fans crammed into the makeshift stadium to attend Opening Day, well exceeding the Jays’ estimated capacity of 43,373.<sup>78</sup> Of the nearly 45,000 in attendance, the guest list was “diamond-studded.”<sup>79</sup> Beside the full lineup of Blue Jay executives, including the team General Manager and President, the game attracted notable persons from all corners of society: San Diego Padres General Manager Buzie Bavasi, father of Blue Jays GM Peter Bavasi; Labatt Breweries President Don McDougall; Major League Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn; American League President Lee MacPhail; Ontario Premier Bill Davis and Canadian Minister of Finance Donald Macdonald, both of whom were booed at the game for their work “helping to keep the populace pure by forbidding the sale of beer”;<sup>80</sup> Montreal Expos owner Charles Bronfman; Toronto Mayor David Crombie<sup>81</sup>; Mayor July Gould of Dunedin, Florida, where the Jays played spring ball; and former Metro Chairman William Allen.<sup>82</sup> Even Robert Redford, the California-based movie star, was rumored to have purchased a ticket, though records were mixed on whether he actu-

ally attended.<sup>83</sup> For lesser-known civic servants, celebrities, and common people across Ontario, Opening Day proved to be the event of the season. One local judge allegedly even delayed sentencing a prisoner in order to attend the game.<sup>84</sup> Everyone wanted to be at Exhibition, or so the press reported: “Grandmothers are too busy to die today; they planned to be at the ball game themselves,” wrote Star reporter John Brehl.<sup>85</sup>

The players, too, could feel the energy. “The fans really got me pumped up,” said Blue Jays first baseman Doug Ault after the opener. “I wanted to play. The stands were full, and it was Opening Day. I felt they would do everything to play the game.”<sup>86</sup> Bill Singer, the Jays’ inaugural starting pitcher, attributed his performance to the crowd. “I love the fans here...they cheered just about everything that happened out there.”<sup>87</sup>

Ault and Singer were Americans – insiders to the game of baseball but outsiders to the True North Strong and Free. The Blue Jays’ Opening Day lineup boasted only a single Canadian: third baseman Dave McKay, who experienced “an emotional moment”<sup>88</sup> during the game. “I broke out in goosebumps when Anne Murray sang O Canada, and that kind of surprised me,”<sup>89</sup> he said. “Sure I had the jitters. My hands were shaking from the cold.”<sup>90</sup> For McKay, though, the sport transcended national boundaries. “Once the game started I wasn’t the lone Canadian. I was a member of the Blue Jays team.”<sup>91</sup>

On the afternoon of April 7, 1977, after years of anticipation, months of coverage, a long spring training, and armies of volunteers scrambling last-minute to prepare the field for play, Toronto almost missed the entire spectacle. To blame was the weather. In the week leading up to Opening Day, locals worried that a rainout might delay the much-anticipated franchise commencement to Easter Sunday, a dreaded alternative that disfavored postponement. Indeed, by game time on Thursday, April 7, 1:48 PM,<sup>92</sup> a blanket of snow had accumulated over the field, forcing General Manager Bavasi to nearly call off the match. But, eventually, with a lull in the “full-scale blizzard,”<sup>93</sup> the festivities commenced only a few minutes after schedule. To the rescue came the quintessential Canadian method of arena preparation: a Zamboni, the great symbol of national recreation, brought out to squeegee precipitate off the AstroTurf.<sup>94</sup> The adverse conditions, use of non-traditional groundskeeping, and decision to forge ahead would collectively become a trademark for the Jays. “Not giving in to the elements,” wrote Stephen Brunt, “became the Blue Jay way.”<sup>95</sup>

Pre-game ceremonies were kept brief, much to the appreciation of freezing fans and players. The 48th Highlanders marched onto the outfield and played “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Then pop sensation Anne Murray sang “O Canada.” At long last, baseball in Toronto had become a reality.

The first pitch in Blue Jays history was a high fastball for a called strike to 1974 National League Batting Champion Ralph Garr of the Chicago White Sox. Under orders from the league, home plate umpire Nestor Chylak immediately removed the ball from

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play so it could be sent to and preserved at the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame.<sup>96</sup>

Not that all forty-four thousand fans saw the first at-bat, which ended in a walk: a massive traffic jam left hundreds of ticket holders stranded on the streets outside the stadium.<sup>97</sup> Worse, by Garr's plate appearance, the punctual fans on time to the stadium were growing cold and impatient. Chants of "we want beer" had built to a crescendo throughout the stadium, implicating many of the very policymakers in attendance. The players sympathized. "Those fans are great," bull pen pitcher Pete Vuckovich said after the game.<sup>98</sup> "I loved that chant, 'we want beer.' I'm inclined to agree with them."<sup>99</sup> (Later, in the sixth inning, a small plane flew overhead dragging a banner with thick upper-cased letters: "Good Luck Jays! Now Give Us Beer Bill."<sup>100</sup> The plane had been rented by the Toronto Sun as a good-humored publicity stunt.)

Ultimately, though, fans found their way around the prohibition. Thousands of attendees, "desperate for a quaff with big league baseball,"<sup>101</sup> smuggled in flasks, bottles, and other receptacles filled with beer and hard liquor. "Mickey's of rye, vodka, scotch, rum, and liqueurs were openly flaunted" with little reprobation.<sup>102</sup> In fact, according to reports from the game, "when stadium employees began collecting trash after the first inning, the clunk of empty whisky and wine bottles was as loud as the rustle of empty popcorn boxes."<sup>103</sup> Toronto the Good had made an Opening Day exception to its own continence.

On the field, though, without the relief of libations, frustrations mounted through the first inning. Singer, "pitching in mud"<sup>104</sup> atop an uncooperative mound mired in sleet, gave up two quick runs to an offensively stacked Chicago squad. The troubles continued as the White Sox took the field in the bottom half of the inning when John Scott and Hector Torres, the first batters in Blue Jays' history, struck out swinging. Then Ault came to the plate. On a 1-1 count, the slugger from Texas lifted an outside curveball high and deep over the left field fence. A home run. The first ever for the Blue Jays franchise. "What a thrill for this crowd,"<sup>105</sup> shouted television announcer Don Chevrier over a protracted standing ovation from the fans. "They're roaring like a World Series crowd here."<sup>106</sup> By the end of the first inning, the Blue Jays had checked off a number of club milestones: their first hit, first run, first homer, and first error, committed by catcher Rick Cerone on an errant throw to second base.<sup>107</sup> As the second inning began, Toronto trailed the White Sox, 2-1. But already the team had won the crowd.

Over resistance from nature, the full nine-inning game would go on for three hours and twenty-two minutes to feature a number of other such firsts: most notably, the first Blue Jays win, 9-5. The game created stars in Ault and Singer, whose legacies as Blue Jays founding fathers were cemented in history. On April 7, 1977, for at least a single night, the dream of baseball in Toronto had triumphed.

"We're going to go out and play every game just like this,"<sup>108</sup> said Doug Ault,

Opening Day hero, after slugging two home runs to help lift the Blue Jays over the White Sox. “All we’ve been hearing all through spring training is how we’re going to lose two-thirds of our games...we don’t feel that way. We feel that we can win every day we go out, no matter what team we’re playing.”<sup>109</sup> After the game, the city’s first baseman vaulted to superstar status. Across Toronto, children looked up to Big Ault with starry eyes and full hearts. He was, according to contemporary Toronto sportswriter Jim Proudfoot, the Blue Jays’ first “instant hero,” their first “legitimate matinee idol, with both ability and charm.”<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, by the late evening of April 7, 1977, if Toronto rested its dreams of baseball on any single mortal, Doug Ault singly shouldered the burden. With a dash of luck, the Texan could become Toronto’s Babe Ruth, Roger Maris, or Joe DiMaggio. “It was the start of a romance that looks as though it might last,” Proudfoot touted. “Love for the Jays and, in particular, for the newest heartthrob in Toronto sport, Douglas Reagan Ault.”<sup>111</sup> Hopes ran high. “Today marks a new era in Toronto,” announced Metro Chairman Godfrey before the game. “It took seven years of hard work before they gave us a team, but we finally got one, and it’s a good one.”<sup>112</sup> As fans left Exhibition Stadium after their team’s first-ever victory, chants echoed into the Toronto night: “We’re number one! We’re number one!”<sup>113</sup>

Yet for the players, the franchise, the fans, and the city, the future of baseball would not prove so ceaselessly rosy. Despite the promising start, the Blue Jays finished the 1977 season dead last in the Majors, with 54 wins and a staggering 107 losses<sup>114</sup>—45½ games behind “baseball’s most glamorous team,”<sup>115</sup> the 1977 World Champion New York Yankees.

As an expansion team, the fledgling organization struggled to develop a robust scouting system capable of cultivating players ready for the big leagues. “While the management of the Company is committed to building a strong farm system,” wrote General Manager Bavasi in late 1977, “it may not be until 1981 before the first minor league players are ready to perform capably for the Major League Blue Jays.”<sup>116</sup> With expectations intentionally kept low, over the next five years attendance would slowly dwindle from a peak of 1.7 million in the 1977 season to 1.5 million in 1978 to just 1.2 million in 1982 when, under the management of Hall of Fame coach Bobby Cox, the Blue Jays finished sixth of seven teams in the American League East.<sup>117</sup>

It would not be until the mid-1980s that the farm system, in seemingly permanent development, produced a period of extended success. In 1985 the Jays won the AL East with a 99-62 record, missing a championship berth by just a single game.<sup>118</sup> The bluebirds would rally for the playoffs in 1989 and again in 1991, with the biggest breaks coming in 1992 and 1993 when the Jays clinched back-to-back World Series victories in a new stadium—the SkyDome, later renamed Rogers Center—better suited to their tal-

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ent and climate.

By the mid-90s, Canada's second Major League team had consistently outshone its national rivals to the east, the Expos. After thirty-five years without a pennant, the Montreal squad packed up and moved to Washington, D.C. in 2004. The Queen City was not only the most recent inheritor of the Canadian baseball dream, but now its heir apparent. Toronto the Good had proven itself great.

The stars of the 1977 season, though, ultimately fared less fortunately than the ball club they had helped found. Surrounded by unprecedented stardom and monstrous expectations, Doug Ault balked. He played unremarkable ball for another three years before exiting the Majors forever in 1980.<sup>119</sup> For the next two decades, Ault rotated between managerial positions in the Minor Leagues, retiring in 1994 to become a car dealer in Texas. He eventually moved to Florida to be closer to Blue Jays spring training in Dunedin where his life, career, and dreams once thrived. But without baseball, Ault struggled. Chronic depression, two failed marriages, and bankruptcy instantiated his undoing. In late 2004, three days before Christmas, Ault was found dead in his Florida home from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He was just fifty-four years old.<sup>120</sup>

For Singer, the starting right-hander who heroically battled the elements, Opening Day represented "the beginning and end of it for him."<sup>121</sup> Injured by early summer, Singer underwent career-ending back surgery in July of 1977 and spent the entire 1978 season on the disabled list. By Opening Day 1979, the right-hander had returned to California to sell real estate.<sup>122</sup> Over the next thirty years, he would bounce between three different ball clubs as a managerial assistant and professional scout. He returned to the spotlight in 2003 when, as a special assistant to New York Mets General Manager Jim Duquette, Singer was fired following racially insensitive comments made toward Dodgers assistant general manager Kim Ng, a Chinese-American baseball executive.<sup>123</sup> Singer later apologized, attributing his remarks to drunkenness.<sup>124</sup>

Pete Vuckovich, meanwhile, managed the most successful career of any individual from the 1977 squad. After the inaugural season, each Blue Jays coach was polled on which roster players they thought might be successful. Only one coach – and not even the pitching coach – mentioned the then-relief pitcher at all.<sup>125</sup> Vuckovich, who earned the save on Opening Day in 1977, stayed in the bigs another nine years, playing for three teams as a starting pitcher.<sup>126</sup> After being traded to St. Louis in the 1977 winter meetings, Vuckovich eventually wound up in Milwaukee, winning the 1982 Cy Young Award with an 18-6 record and 3.34 ERA.<sup>127</sup> Torontonians were shocked. For better or for worse, their baby Jays had grown up.

Naturally, many in 1970s Toronto like alderman George Ben spurned fantasies of baseball's arrival. Like "never-never land," Exhibition Stadium promised something mas-

sive and perhaps unattainable to the people of Toronto: an escape from the drudge of everyday life, a form of entertainment in the empty summer months, and an exotic import from faraway America.

Toronto, though, could not help but leave an ineradicable imprint upon the sport of baseball. From the distinctly Canadian weather to the uniquely Ontarian clamor for beer to the cultural ignorance of the game that persisted for many years after the first Opening Day, the arrival of the Blue Jays embodied much of the Canadian way in the late twentieth-century. Pulled in opposite directions, between following the States' lead and retaining a quiet cultural isolation, and between appropriating an extra-national tradition and rightfully integrating a new convention as its own, Toronto supervised the importation of baseball the very way it had struggled to balance many aspects of its dual identity—from English and French to European and American to a whole slate of domestic issues narrowly bifurcating the populace—with growing pains.

After 1977, baseball in Toronto followed a circuitous trajectory that many, like the low-expectation-setting baseball executives, had anticipated but that few have fully appreciated. The late 70s and early 80s were anything but smooth for the fledgling franchise. But by the early 90s, the back-to-back World Champion Jays had secured a spot in history, both for their organization and for their country. Indeed, after that fateful season in 1992, when the first non-American team won the World Series, the game was no longer America's pastime, but the pastime of the Americas. And that transformation began amid an early April blizzard in the spring of 1977, when the Blue Jays were stuck in "never-never land," a fantasy world ostensibly more fiction than fact, more dream than reality.

"Pan," asks Captain Hook in the 1911 classic *Peter and Wendy*, "who and what art thou?"

"I'm youth, I'm joy,' Peter answered at a venture, 'I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg.'"<sup>129</sup>

Somewhere in never-never land, the Toronto Blue Jays had at last broken out of their egg.

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