



# Mad about hockey



## WASHINGTON, D.C., IS OBSESSED, AND EX-KITCHENER PLAYER IS AMONG CANADIANS LEADING THE CHARGE

By Megan Chuchmach

**IT'S A CLEAR WINTER** Saturday morning, the picture perfect day for a pickup game of street hockey. And sure enough, this street has come alive with two rowdy

teams eager to earn bragging rights from a win.

"Pass it, pass it!" a young man shouts as he flies to the net on inline skates. When he takes the pass and nets a weathered ball past a goalie dressed in a hodge-

podge of pads, his team erupts, fist pumps high to the sky.

Looking at this scene, it would be easy to envision one playing out on streets across Waterloo Region. But this one's happening some 800 kilometres away, in Washington, D.C. And there could be no more ironic background than the stately pillars of the White House to realize that Canada's national game is flourishing in our southern neighbour's capital. ▶

## NOT YOUR AVERAGE STREET

Day jobs and political stripes are set aside for weekend street hockey games on Pennsylvania Avenue outside the White House in Washington, D.C. The street was closed to vehicles after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing creating a stretch of pavement that hockey wannabes just can't resist.

Photography • Amine Ferchichi





## CANADIAN CONNECTIONS

Washington Capitals right wing Eric Fehr, 25, from Winkler, Man., introduces children to hockey in a Sticks 'n' Sneakers after-school program in a Washington arena.   
 Photography • Megan Chuchmach

▶ Since Pennsylvania Avenue was closed to vehicles in the aftermath of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, rousing White House hockey games have steadily grown in popularity. Now, throngs of fans congregate on the sidewalk to cheer on the players, who include the Secret Service, government employees and lobbyists, a mixture of Republican and Democrat, who put politics aside to play some puck.

“Our prominent location has definitely attracted some attraction,” says David Epstein, 44, a lobbyist who’s been playing since 1999. “People will be walking by the White House and see us out there and say, ‘Hey! I want to play!’ ”

It’s not the only place inside America’s Beltway where Canada’s game has taken off. Across town at the Naval Academy, youth hockey leagues are flourishing — a rarity in U.S. towns where football, baseball and basketball typically dominate

kids’ enrolment.

And in the suburbs of Arlington, Virginia, players on the Washington Capitals are lacing up for a game day warmup, the bleachers packed with hundreds of diehard fans who have turned a not-so-long-ago neglected team into one of the most popular NHL franchises with consistently sold-out crowds.

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“When I got here it had always been a football town; it was Redskins Nation,” says Brooks Laich, a 27-year-old centre from Saskatchewan. “Now it’s becoming a real hockey town with more and more people becoming hockey fans.”

Laich credits the team’s interaction with the community with getting fans involved with hockey at the grassroots level. There are open practices and programs like Sticks ‘n’ Sneakers — an after-school hockey program that introduces kids to the sport,

taught by Caps players themselves — and Hockey ‘n’ Heels, which does the same thing for women.

“That’s where it really has to start,” he says, adding that having a good team and a big name like Russian Alex Ovechkin definitely helps.

And he doesn’t skip a beat now when asked about the best part of playing Canada’s game in the U.S. capital.

“Definitely the fans,” Laich says. He says when the team is on the road “after almost every game we’re saying, ‘Geez that building is dead.’ There’s no excitement there, even in some Canadian cities, which is surprising.”

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An hour before the Washington Capitals take to the ice for a weeknight evening game, the Verizon Center in downtown Washington, D.C., is already packed, the arena dressed in a sea of red.

If you’re not decked out in at least a jersey, consider yourself a stand-out. Cowbells, foam fingers and face paint are commonplace here.

Pumping up the fans with musical



Photography • Megan Chuchmach



Photography • Chris Nelson

## ENTHUSIASTIC FANS

At a packed Washington Capitals game, DJ Brett Leonhardt gets the crowd going with his personalized spins, for which he takes Twitter requests. Leonhardt, formerly from Kitchener, even put his goaltending skills to work for part of a period two seasons ago when the Capitals goalie was injured.

stylings ranging from AC/DC to Busta Rhymes is DJ Brett Leonhardt. And if his name sounds familiar, that’s probably because you’ve likely heard it before.

Leonhardt is a hometown hockey boy, a former stand-out goaltender with the Kitchener Dutchmen.

He went on to play college hockey at the State University of New York at Oswego and Neumann College, before accepting a job as a producer of the Capitals website and hanging up the skates. Or so he thought.

Two seasons ago, as the Capitals were preparing for a hometown game against the Ottawa Senators, their starting goalie was injured. The team called a goalie up from the American Hockey League affiliate, but he couldn’t get there in time. So that afternoon, Leonhardt was sitting in his cubicle

when the team’s general manager tapped him on the shoulder and told him to “be ready.”

Leonhardt ended up dressing and warming up with the team, leaving at the 10:57 mark during the first period when the backup goalie arrived.

“It was a dream come true, out there skating,” Leonhardt says.

Had he played, the 6-foot seven-inch Leonhardt would have tied a NHL record for the tallest goalie in the league. Now, Leonhardt has commanded a following of his own, with Capitals fans sending in DJ list requests each game. At a recent game hosting the Toronto Maple Leafs, as Leonhardt spun tunes, a few fans with “Leonhardt” jerseys could be spotted.

“It’s crazy. Every time I see someone with my jersey I’m shocked and I usually can’t

hold back the smile,” says Leonhardt. “It’s just a cool reminder that I got to skate out on the ice with an NHL team.”

He wasn’t the only familiar face at the rink that night. There was another Waterloo Region hockey alum out on the ice, just not for the home team.

Tim Brent, 26, playing his first season with the Toronto Maple Leafs, was a local hockey star growing up, first playing with Hespeler Shamrocks minor hockey and the Cambridge Winterhawks before moving on to the St. Michael’s Majors of the Ontario Hockey League. He captained Canada’s under-18 team to a gold medal at the Six Nations Cup in the Czech Republic before hopping between a few professional teams and landing in Toronto.

As a proud Hespeler boy, born and bred, Brent is finally realizing his lifelong dream ▶



▶ to sport the Maple Leafs jersey. A life on the road and living out of a suitcase can get tiresome, he says, but one of the perks of the job is seeing different cities across North America. And on his first trip to Washington, D.C., he quickly noticed the passion of its fans.

“As soon as I came out on the ice in warmup there were fans all along the glass, screaming and yelling for their team,” Brent says. “It was pretty evident in the crowd that hockey is alive and well in D.C., as opposed to some other American cities, that’s for sure.”

The only disappointment, Brent points out, was that they didn’t have enough time to go sightseeing in the U.S. capital, only seeing a glimpse of the Washington monument from the bus on the way to the airport.

“The fans in D.C. seem to have quickly caught on to the rules and know the game well; they were cheering in all the right places!” Brent says with a laugh.

Ever the loyal Leafs player, whose family comes to watch nearly every one of his home games, Brent is careful to emphasize that “the best fans’ award still goes to Toronto back home.”



Laich was looking forward to hosting the Leafs, the hockey team he grew up idolizing. And, he says, he’s proud to say that Washington, D.C., isn’t far behind some of the league’s most loyal hockey cities.

“It might not be Detroit or Toronto yet,” Laich says, “but this non-traditional hockey town is getting there.”

It’s clear that Laich is one of the fan favourites. Even kids looking on at the morning practice sport his jersey and grin ear-to-ear when he raises his stick to acknowledge their cheers from the sideline.

Laich, whose Canadian accent still stands out despite years of playing down south, cemented himself in the hearts of Washingtonians last season when, even after a devastating elimination in Game 7 of the playoffs, he exuded the friendly spirit for which Canadians are known.

Laich was driving home after a heart-



A random act of kindness helped make Brooks Laich, 27, from Wawota, Sask., a favourite with the Capitals fans. Here, Laich is interviewed by the media after a pre-game practice. Photography • Megan Chuchmach

breaking loss to the Montreal Canadiens (a real upset since the Capitals went into the series as the top team in the southeast division of the Eastern Conference and the Habs were seeded last in eighth place). He was passing over a bridge named for the 26th U.S. President, Theodore Roosevelt, when he noticed two Capitals fans stranded on the side.

There stood Mary Ann Wangemann and her 14-year-old daughter, still in their Capitals jerseys and red face paint, with a flat tire.

“We had two emotions that night,” recalls Wangemann. “We were sad because the Caps had lost, and then we were concerned because we weren’t in a great area of Washington, D.C.”

Wangemann said she and her daughter were stunned when Laich stopped and apologized for the team being put out of a playoff run. Then, still in his post-game suit, Laich spent 40 minutes jacking up the car and changing the flat tire, before giving his starstruck fans a hug and asking them to repay the favour someday.

“Brooks Laich went above and beyond the call that night,” Wangemann says. “That

says a lot about a person.”

Now, more than seven months later, Laich is clearly uncomfortable with all the attention his good deed garnered, saying, “Everywhere I go people ask me to change their tire.” The random act of kindness even earned him a nomination for Sports Illustrated’s prestigious Sportsman of the Year award. Instead, he prefers to talk about the transition he’s seen Washington’s hockey culture undergo since he joined the team in 2005.

“We used to say when we had a home game, it was ‘Dress like a seat night,’ ” Laich says with a laugh. “We’d say we had fans — they were just all dressed as seats.”

But now, five years later, Laich describes a totally transformed town. In fact, more and more fans are becoming hooked on the games, so much so that most of the home games are sold out and more than 90 per cent of season ticket holders renew their subscriptions.

“Since I’ve been here I’ve said that our biggest problem is trying to get fans in the building once,” says Laich. “Once they come in, they see a fight, they see a goal, they see a hit, and then they fall in love with the game right away and come back.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by other Canadians on the team, including Matt Bradley, a 32-year-old right wing from Stittsville, Ont.

“People are really behind us here,” says Bradley.

He’s quick to talk about his Canadian upbringing, which he says led him to implement a recycling program in the locker rooms of the two arenas the Capitals play and practise in.

“Growing up in Canada where we have such a strong environmental focus, it was really surprising to be down here and not see recycling bins at the end of driveways,” he says. “So anything we as players can help improve here, I think is good.”

Just another example of how, in a city in which international relations is one of the main spectacles, these hometown Canadian boys are helping to highlight Canada’s passions before a whole new audience. 