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Hockey Card Statistics Are Stagnant and Stale

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Synopsis

The purchase of a coffee at a Canadian institution, Tim Hortons, turned into an informal investigation into hockey card statistics. Turns out, hockey card statistics are stagnant and stale. This was disappointing to see because the game of hockey has changed, and the statistics used to keep track of the game have changed. Even the cards have changed. Well, not the back of the cards, which do not well enough paint a statistical picture of the hockey player photographed on the front of the card.

Keywords: hockey cards; National Hockey League; statistics; Tim Hortons; trading cards.

Tim Hortons NHL (National Hockey League) Trading Card season is upon us here in Canada. 'Tis the season, most Canadians can purchase a pack of cards for \$1.99. Should you need (what Canadians call) a “Timmies”, just a “Loonie” (our one-dollar coin) gets you a pack of hockey cards. Recently, on my way to an early morning hockey game, I picked up a pack. Full disclosure, I haven't paid attention to hockey cards for years. Probably since the 1990s, which is when the Upper Deck company disrupted the hockey card market. So, as I drove to the rink, sipping on my coffee, I started thinking about how the game of hockey has changed since I last was invested (not financially speaking) in hockey cards.

Arguably, the biggest change has been around concussions. The days of “getting your bell rung” and then “skating it off” the next shift are (or should be) over. The NHL is looking to eliminate head shots. As well, fighting is down. The era of ‘enforcers’ has made way for the ‘water bugs’. No way, then, are they still keeping track of Penalty Minutes (PIM), which was code

for if and how often you fought, on the back of hockey cards in 2023–2024, or so I thought on the way to the rink.

With visions of Penalty Minutes dancing in my head, the other big change to the game of hockey, especially professional hockey, surrounds statistics. Not only is the game of hockey changing, but statistics, those used to track the game of hockey, also are changing. Today’s stats are not your mother’s nor your father’s stats, however. Advances in computing power have, no doubt, changed statistics. In a rather short period of time, as best I can follow at this dizzying pace, statistics has made way for advanced statistics, analytics, data analytics, sports analytics, data science and whatever comes next. Lest we forget *Moneyball*. In other words, move over “simple” statistics, like Points (P) and Assists (A); “Corsi” (a count of all shot attempts) and “Fenwick” (a count of all unblocked shot attempts) have entered the mix.

Having made it to the rink, but having forgotten the cards in the car, our pre-game, dressing-room conversation focused on trying to remember which stats had been on the back of hockey cards back in the day. To keep the conversation focused, we tried to imagine what was on the back of the Holy Grail of hockey cards, O-Pee-Chee 1979-80, card #18, Wayne Gretzky’s rookie card. As a team, as it was confirmed by a teammate who broke the cardinal sin of bringing out their “smart” phone in the dressing room, we did a pretty good job putting our heads together. The statistics on the back of the Holy Grail of hockey cards, those related to The Great One’s Playing Record, were Games Played (GP), Goals (G), Assists (A), Points (PTS) and Penalty Minutes (PIM). Distracted as I played the game, no way then, I thought, are those the only statistics found on the back of hockey cards in 2023-2024.

Commiserating over yet another loss, unable to find the cards I had purchased at Tim Hortons, I found myself on the couch in the basement, somewhat watching hockey on television and somewhat surfing the internet. A few clicks after Google, I found myself at NHL Stats (dot com) and NHL Records (dot com). I could not believe it; they had statistics for practically everything! For example, the NHL was keeping track of secondary assists, faceoff wins and losses, shots, time on ice and much more. Run of the mill stuff, but they are also keeping track of between the legs goals, missed shots that hit the post, failed penalty shots and many others. With so many statistics at the ready, I dragged myself off the couch, barely, and went looking for those hockey cards, with the hopes of new-fangled statistics on the back.

Nestled between the driver's seat and the center console, of course, I finally found the cards. The moment was upon me, I was about to learn of the changes to the statistics found on the back of hockey cards. As I fumbled open the pack, I envisioned flipping the card over and seeing a colourful shot dispersion chart, the kind you see in the National Basketball Association (NBA), albeit for Sydney Crosby. Perhaps a chart or graph of something I had never even thought about? Any thoughts of interesting data visualizations were quickly squashed when I turned the first card over and saw: GP, G, A, PTS, Plus/Minus (+/-), PIM and Power Play Goals (PPG). That's right, the same seven columns I'd found when I used to open Upper Deck hockey cards back in 1990, which was nearly 35 years ago.

Maybe it was just Tim Hortons hockey cards with stale statistics, I thought. Time to buy some hockey cards and test my theory. Over the next little while, and spending way more money than I had initially budgeted for "hockey cards", I bought seven different packs, representing seven different series. The statistics on the back of the 2022–2023 Upper Deck Extended, 2021–2022 SP Hockey, 2022–2023 O-Pee-Chee and 2022–2023 O-Pee-Chee Platinum series hockey cards were all the same. Even the 2022 Team Canada Juniors and 2021–2022 Canadian Hockey League (CHL) series had the same statistics: GP, G, A, PTS, +/-, PIM and PPG. The 2022–2023 MVP Hockey series from Upper Deck just had a sentence describing a thing that happened in a game?! Hopes dashed, I had to cede to the reality that hockey card statistics are stagnant and stale.

Even with a limited sample set, I can declare that hockey cards and the front of hockey cards have changed. The material with which the cards are made has definitely changed, but, yes, the corners still bend. These days, there are acetate cards (which look like plexiglass), an inordinate number of cards with a landscape orientation, and a bunch of rookie cards that all look different than the rest of the cards in the series. I even hear there's a thing called a jersey card, which is a card containing a piece of embedded jersey. Jersey cards, patch cards (a card that includes part of a patch found on a team jersey), letterman cards, logo patch cards—companies are going to extreme lengths with hockey cards these days. One of the packs I opened had an autographed card in it. As it says on the back, "This autograph was signed in the presence of a representative of the The Upper Deck Company or provided, and certified as to its authenticity, by" one of the 2022 Team Canada Junior Players. That's a lot of investment in a hockey card, for sure.

In the spirit of Tim Hortons Trading Card season, I am looking to trade my autographed hockey card from the 2022 Team Canada Junior series by Upper Deck. In fact, I'm looking to trade the whole lot, every card I bought. All I'm looking for, in exchange, are hockey cards with less stagnant, less stale statistics on the back. Hockey has changed, hockey cards have changed, and it's now time to use the back of hockey cards to paint proper statistical portraits of hockey players, ones befitting the effort being put on the front side of the card and by the players on the ice.