

“Movin' On Up: The WHA and Edmonton”

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Dave Whitson and Donald Macintosh argue in their article, *Becoming a World-Class City*, that economic and demographic shift bringing people and money westward in North America in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in these newly wealthy cities searching for greater status in their own countries and the world.¹ The story of Edmonton, Alberta provides good evidence for their argument. Due to unprecedented oil boom Edmonton experienced massive growth during this period. Despite this prosperity no one considered Edmonton anything more than a regional city. In Canadian national politics only the major cities in Ontario and Quebec mattered. Edmonton, however, projected itself onto the national stage when a national energy crisis occurred in the winter of 1973 and 1974, and when a federal-provincial battle over national energy policies followed that lasted until oil prices dropped in 1983. Alongside these political developments, Edmonton got a major league hockey team, the Edmonton Oilers, in 1972 and hosted the Commonwealth Games in 1978. This discussion will focus on how the Edmonton Oilers contributed to the idea among Edmontonians that their city had become world-class in the 1970s. In order to make this clear a general understanding of how major league sports teams affect a city's development is important.

Sports teams bring status to their home cities by interacting with and receiving attention from competing cities' sports teams. Most, if not all, news services treat sporting events as news. This began prior to World War I in North America.² Quite quickly sports news earned its own section in many newspapers, on radio, and later television, and with its own periodicals.³ Since teams from the top leagues in Canada and the United States would play each other regularly, the sporting events would be covered in both the Canadian and American press,

¹ David Whitson and Donald Macintosh, "Becoming a World-Class City: Hallmark Events and Sports Franchises in the Growth Strategies of Western Canadian Cities," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 10 (1993): 226.

² C. Betke, "Sports Promotion in the Western Canadian City: The Example of Early Edmonton," *Urban History Review* 12(2) (1983): 55.

³ Whitson and Macintosh, 225, 227.

and so teams had coverage across the continent. Prior to the existence of big league teams in a city, the city's news service would provide information on the contests between teams of the major leagues, usually in addition to information on its local teams. Regarding hockey, the *Edmonton Journal* in the 1960s would have had stories on the latest game between Montreal Canadians and the New York Rangers of the National Hockey League. *Hockey Night In Canada* first as a radio broadcast in 1923, and then as a television broadcast in 1952, helped to give NHL teams national recognition by airing games live across the country. The fact that only the major league teams receive coverage continent-wide means that only cities with those teams get continental recognition. People across Canada and the United States know about Madison Square Garden and the Montreal Forum, but they do not know about the Edmonton Gardens.⁴

Many cities across North America recognized this. As a result, what can be referred to as "neo-boosterism," a term used by Paul Voisey in his article *Unsolved Mysteries of Edmonton's Growth* emerged in the 1960s. Traditional boosterism, the predecessor of neo-boosterism, has a long history. Primarily during western expansion in North America, towns would compete with one another for people and investment. Local fairs would be held to attract attention. A variety of recreational facilities would be built to make people choose to settle in one town rather than another. As well local sports teams would compete with other cities to show that its city was better than the opponent's city. The people that attempted to showcase a certain city's attractions, boosters, were often local businessmen who stood to gain money if the town prospered.

⁴ The Edmonton Gardens was where Edmonton's junior hockey team, the Edmonton Oil Kings, played, and where the Edmonton Oilers played until the Coliseum was built in 1974.

Boosterism played a significant role in Edmonton's history. At the beginning of the twentieth century neither Edmonton nor Calgary was in the dominant position each is today. Cities like Red Deer, Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge all had potential to be the major centers of Alberta. As a result, all of these cities were in competition with each other. The success of the city was not measured entirely in economic terms, but also in the success of the local sports teams.⁵ Edmonton had hockey teams that challenged for the Stanley Cup twice in the first decade of the 1900s. In December 1908 the Edmonton Eskimos hockey team lost to the Montreal Wanderers in a two game total goal series.⁶ The team was sponsored by a local booster named J.H. Morris who owned the Department store in the city.⁷ Edmonton challenged again in 1910, and lost to the Ottawa Senators. In 1913 the Edmonton Stock Pavilion was built as an arena for major events. In typical booster fashion, the arena was heralded as having larger floor space than Madison Square Gardens.⁸ Edmonton again had a shot at the Stanley Cup as a member of the Western Canada Hockey League (WCHL). The league was formed in 1921 as an alternate league to the National Hockey League, which was isolated to Eastern cities. Edmonton challenged for the Stanley Cup in 1922, once again losing to the Ottawa Senators. The league collapsed in 1926 and Edmonton would not have another chance to play for the Stanley Cup until the 1980s. Nevertheless, Edmonton boosters used these accomplishments as tools for promoting the city.

The growth of cities in the 1950s and 1960s led to a renewed boosterism, or neo-boosterism. Neo-boosterism still involved promoting the famer features of a city, but it was on a much grander scale than traditional boosterism. Instead of fairs being used to attract attention to

⁵ David Mills, "100 Years of Sport" in *Alberta: A State of Mind*, ed. Sydney Sharpe (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2005), 212.

⁶ Mills, 213.

⁷ Mills, 213.

⁸ Mills, 213.

a town, massive expositions would be held. Giant, distinctive stadiums that would instantly identify a city would be created. Rather than having a team in a regional league, big drawing, continental leagues with teams that received attention across North America would be established.⁹ A good example of a neo-booster is Jean Drapeau, the mayor of Montreal from 1954 to 1957 and then from 1960 to 1986. While in office he brought the World's Fair to Montreal in 1967, a Major League Baseball franchise, the Montreal Expos, to the city in 1969, and the Summer Olympics in 1976.¹⁰ By doing this he brought a lot of international attention to Montreal. However, many other cities also pursued neo-boosterist projects. Los Angeles built Dodger Stadium in 1962, which some people argue transformed it from a regional manufacturing and trading center into a national city.¹¹ Houston got a major league baseball franchise named the Houston Colt .45s (later renamed the Astros) in the same year, and they built the Astrodome for the team in 1965. Pressure on the NHL from a number of cities, including Vancouver, caused the league to expand from six teams to twelve teams in 1967. This was the first expansion since 1927 when the Detroit Red Wings joined the league. The six newly admitted teams to the NHL were the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Philadelphia Flyers, the Minnesota North Stars, the Los Angeles Kings, the St. Louis Blues, and the Oakland Seals. Vancouver built the Pacific Coliseum in the late 1960s in hopes of cashing in on the NHL expansion, but it was initially bypassed. However, in 1971-1972 the Vancouver Canucks were admitted to the NHL. Edmonton, which also experienced a boom during the 1960s and 1970s, had major league aspirations. Before these can be discussed, there will be a brief overview of Edmonton's growth.

⁹ Paul Voisey, "Unsolved Mysteries of Edmonton's Growth," in *Edmonton: Life of a City*, eds. Bob Hesketh and Francis Swyripa (Edmonton, AB: NeWest Publishers Limited, 1995), 334.

¹⁰ Voisey, 334.

¹¹ Whitson and Macintosh, 227.

Alberta and Edmonton experienced a major economic boom in the late 1960s and 1970s. As early as 1967 Alberta was classified as a 'have' as opposed to a 'have-not' province by federal standards, and at that point it was only slightly as prosperous as it would later become.¹² Edmonton, and Alberta in general, had experienced economic growth as a result of the oil industry since Leduc No. 1 oil well struck in 1947. This prosperity continued at a slow but steady pace all the way through the 1960s. In the late 1960s the oil industry began to expand further. The number of oil wells in Alberta increased from 12,771 in 1965 to 14,368 by 1973.¹³ More important than the increased development of Alberta's oil reservoirs was the utilization of the tar sands in 1967. Alberta's tar sands which encompassed a vast area of land in the northern part of the province had long been known to contain a form of oil that could be extracted if refined correctly. However, setting up an operation in the tar sands was considerably more expensive than merely extracting oil from an existing reservoir, and so for a long time no company thought of investing in the tar sands. By the late 1960s though the amount of easily extractable oil in Alberta began to diminish, and some people began to see that the future of the oil industry in Alberta was in the tar sands. The first company to take advantage of the oil sands was Great Canadian Oil Sands Limited (GCOS), which began mining on 30 September 1967. Due to the high cost of set up and operation GCOS did not make a profit until 1972, but the future of Alberta's oil industry had begun.¹⁴

Most people saw a benefit from the boom, not just the oil companies. The average per capita income per year in Alberta rose from \$2,306 in 1966 to \$4,929 in 1974.¹⁵ Much of this was to due to a growing middle class. The oil boom created a number of jobs in addition to

¹² Paul Bunner, *Lougheed and the War with Ottawa: 1971-1974*, (Edmonton, AB: History Book Publications Ltd, 2003), 50.

¹³ J.G. MacGregor, *Edmonton: A History*, (Edmonton, AB: Hurtig Publishers, 1975), 310.

¹⁴ MacGregor, 320.

¹⁵ MacGregor, 311.

those directly involved with oil extraction. A number of specialists were required for the oil business to run smoothly, including technical specialists, financial managers, and lawyers.¹⁶ All of these were white collar jobs with substantial salaries. General business expansion in this period, as a result of economic prosperity, also increased the need for office workers and managers. This increased the number of white collar jobs in Edmonton. Probably one of the biggest sources of middle class employment in Edmonton, however, was a result of provincial government expansion. Despite the fact that the Social Credit party, which controlled the province from 1935 to 1971, and Ernest Manning, who was Premier of Alberta from 1943 until 1968, are regarded as being fiscally conservative, the provincial government spent more per capita than any other provincial government in Canada by 1957.¹⁷ When the Progressive Conservative party was elected in 1971 they increased government spending exponentially. Government spending increased from \$1 billion a year in 1970, the year before Lougheed took power, to \$4.2 billion a year by the end of the decade.¹⁸ As a result of this spending the government bureaucracy increased, and a massive increase in white collar jobs occurred.¹⁹ A large portion of these government jobs were centered in Edmonton, because it was the capital city. This helped to make up for the fact that a lot of the big business managerial jobs were in Calgary because that was where most of the head offices were located. The importance of the increasing middle-class is that they generally have more free time and more money to spend on sporting events. As well middle-class people are not as concerned with the troubles affecting society as they are with

¹⁶ Voisey, 328.

¹⁷ Howard Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton, AB: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 315.

¹⁸ Brunner, 52.

¹⁹ Voisey, 331.

things like professional sports teams and identity.²⁰ Concern about how the growth of the province was being handled was important in the 1971 provincial elections, however.

As was already mentioned, in 1971 Albertans elected a new provincial government. The main issue was the ability to deal with Alberta's development. The Social Credit's leader in 1971 was Harry Strom, who showed that the party had become old-fashioned and unsuited to dealing with the current era's problems. Peter Lougheed had a new vision for Alberta. This election marked a shift in Albertans and Edmontonians thinking away from a traditionalist to a more modern perspective; Lougheed did not disappoint. One of his key objectives was to turn Alberta into a 'mature' province and move into the mainstream of Canada.²¹ Paul Brunner claims that "Peter Lougheed wanted Alberta to shed its hayseed, little-province image and become a major player on the national stage."²² The national stage, however, was dominated by Ontario and Quebec, and they were perfectly happy keeping it that way. Beginning in 1973, after the price of oil skyrocketed, Ottawa began a series of policies which attempted to limit Alberta's new power. Included in these policies were price controls which attempted to keep the domestic price of oil in Canada below world market prices, special taxes that deflected oil revenues from Edmonton to Ottawa, and policies which prompted oil exploration north to the Northwest Territories where the federal government still owned the natural resources.²³ Lougheed took Ottawa on in all these circumstances. Lougheed also created the department of Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs to deal with the federal government in his federal-provincial battles. The only agency that the provinces could go

²⁰ Palmer, 309.

²¹ Brunner, 49.

²² Brunner, 50.

²³ Voisey, 333.

through before this was Ottawa's Privy Council which especially under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had become a tool for advancing federal interests.²⁴

The city of Edmonton experienced physical development in addition to its prosperity during this period. Between 1968 and 1974 Edmonton's population grew by 38%. Since Edmonton's birthrate had dropped to 17.5 per thousand, this means that many people were moving to Edmonton.²⁵ The size of the city also increased. Excluding 1973, the city's borders expanded every year between 1969 and 1974. This included three additions west of the western district of Jasper Place, the addition of Mill Woods in the southeast, and the B.A.C.M block in the north near the Namao airfields. To give a sense of how big an increase this was it should be noted that the total of these additions was equivalent to the size of the city in 1947.²⁶ The most visible aspect of Edmonton's development was the new buildings. In the late 1960s two new high rise apartment complexes were built, the West Meadowlark Complex and Crescent Place. A new \$10 million courthouse was built downtown. Two new bridges were added to allow increased traffic to cross the North Saskatchewan River, the Quesnell in 1968 and the Capilano in 1969. In 1970, Southgate Mall was built and at the time carried all the necessities as well as a variety of exotic products. The downtown skyline began to change with the construction of the forty-five storey Edmonton House apartment complex and the new Alberta Government Telephones building. These buildings dwarfed the other buildings surrounding them. Construction also occurred underground. A series of 'pedways' were built under Jasper Avenue and 100th Street to the Hotel McDonald downtown to allow people to walk around underground and avoid the cold temperatures up on the street

²⁴ Brunner, 76.

²⁵ MacGregor, 312.

²⁶ MacGregor, 309-310.

during winter. Even rising inflation in the early 1970s could not stop construction. Londonderry Mall was built on the north side of the city. The Pepper Tree building was added to Jasper Avenue, in addition to a \$200 million refinery in Clover Bar. Also, the James McDonald bridge across the North Saskatchewan was built and the Beverly Bridge was twinned.²⁷ Education and the arts also received support during this period. In 1972 eight new buildings were under construction at the University of Alberta: the Arts, Chemistry, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, and Law buildings as well as a new library. This was probably necessary considering full-time enrollment at the University increased from 11,515 students in 1966 to 18,524 students in 1974.²⁸ In regards to the arts, the Edmonton Art Gallery, featuring exhibits from the National Gallery and private collections, was built, and a brand new \$5 million theatre for the Citadel group started construction.²⁹ From this it can be seen that the city was transformed during the late 1960s and 1970s. The people were prosperous and Edmonton was beginning to appear as a major city, but in the words of Bill Hunter, the man who brought the Edmonton Oilers to the city, "despite its prosperity and growth, Edmonton was really an overgrown small town back then with a small-town homogeneity to it."³⁰ Edmonton needed that extra attraction to propel itself from provincial to national status. A major league sports team would fulfill this purpose.

Before the World Hockey Association, Edmonton had two main sports franchises, the Edmonton Eskimos of the Canadian Football League and the Edmonton Oil Kings junior hockey team. But, the CFL always suffered from the close proximity of an arguably superior league, the National Football League, and a lack of acceptance in the United States. Despite this

²⁷ MacGregor, 312-315.

²⁸ MacGregor, 321.

²⁹ MacGregor, 312-313.

³⁰ Bill Hunter and Bob Weber, *Wild Bill: Bill Hunter's Legendary 65 Years in Canadian Sport*, (Canada: Johnson Gorman Publishers, 2000), 165.

fact, the Edmonton Eskimos were popular in the city during the 1950s when they won three Grey Cups in a row, 1954-1956. However, during the 1960s the Eskimos had no success. They did not make it to the Grey Cup championship game from 1960 until 1973. Considering there were only nine teams in the league, this is particularly dismal.

The Oil Kings were not major league hockey either, but they were close. They were the farm team for Detroit until Bill Hunter and other junior hockey team owners in Alberta and Saskatchewan formed the Western Canadian Hockey League in 1966. At that point the Red Wings decided they did not want to get involved with the new junior league and ended their exclusive relationship with the Oil Kings. What is important is that members of the Edmonton Oil Kings had the opportunity to play in the National Hockey League, and many did—players like Hockey Hall of Famers Norm Ullman and member of the famous 'Uke' line of the Boston Bruins, Jolm Bucyk, as well as dozens of others. This meant that big league scouts were coming through Edmonton all the time. When Bill Hunter owned the Oil Kings he personally met with scouts on a regular basis.³¹ This gave Edmonton a small taste of the big time. No doubt, Bill Hunter had a major effect on creating buzz for the team as well.

Bill Hunter was a modern representation of old-time boosterism. He was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on May 5, 1920. Hunter's father was the president of the Saskatoon Curling Association; the vice-president, general manager, and treasurer of the Saskatoon Quakers senior men's league hockey club; and the president of the Saskatoon Quakers senior men's league football club.³² So Bill Hunter had exposure to the power of local sports teams from an early age. In high school, Hunter managed the school's sports teams. After the baseball season ended one summer Hunter took the team on a tour across

³¹ Hunter and Weber, 147.

³² Hunter and Weber, 14-15.

Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The team played seventy-eight games that summer and drew thousands of fans per game.³³ Most entertainment during the Depression was cost prohibitive, and so the arrival of a touring baseball team was appreciated. During World War II, Hunter was a fighter pilot. After he left the service he spent a brief time at CFPQ in Saskatoon as a sportscaster. Later he became a successful salesman for General Foods, but he quit after the head of the company showed little care for him or the real world. Hunter spent one year as manager of a ladies' softball team, the North Battleford Bombers, and nearly helped them to win a national championship. Next Hunter took over the Regina Capitals senior men's team in 1947, but only after his partner ditched out on him and left him with \$17,000 of debt. Along with the financial backing of a banker named Radcliffe, Hunter was able to turn the Regina Capitals into a profitable franchise.³⁴ Other business partners were brought in, and after three years Hunter sold his share of the team to take a position with the Saskatoon Quakers. Hunter left the Quakers in 1951, and became owner of the junior hockey team the Medicine Hat Tigers. He later went back to being a salesman; this time for the First Investor's Group out of Edmonton. There he sold financial planning packages. He used his experience he gained at First Investor's Group to start a series of seminars on salesmanship. His seminars were lucrative, and he often had 2500 people attend at \$50 per person.³⁵ After that he became owner of the Edmonton Oil Kings, and this is where Hunter began to have an effect on Edmonton. His booster attitude and his experience as a salesman and manager of sports teams was just what Edmonton needed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hunter's Oil Kings were very successful. The team played in seven Canadian junior hockey championships, called the Memorial Cup, between 1954 and 1976. The Oil Kings won

³³ Hunter and Weber, 46-47.

³⁴ Hunter and Weber, 84-87.

³⁵ Hunter and Weber, 115-117.

two Memorial Cups in 1963 and 1966. The 1963 championship was in Edmonton, but in 1966 they beat the Oshawa Generals in Ontario. Almost all of the sports experts favored the Oshawa Generals to win the series in five games. Even in Edmonton many of the sports writers like Al McCann, Wes Montgomery, Gordon Fisher, Ernie Afganis, and John Short did not give the Oil Kings a chance, despite the fact that the Oil Kings had won three years before.³⁶ In defense of the experts, the Oshawa Generals had Bobby Orr who was considered to be the best junior player at the time, and no Western team had won the Memorial Cup on Eastern ice in twenty-two years.³⁷ The series was played in Maple Leaf Gardens, was televised in Ontario and received nationwide news coverage. The Oil Kings stunned Oshawa in the first game, but then lost the next two. Most people believed that was it. However, the Oil Kings won three straight games and beat the Generals 4-2 in the best of seven series. In the following years, until Bill Hunter sold his share of the team, the Oil Kings only missed the semi-finals of the WCHL once. In 1967 the Oil Kings hosted the Red Army hockey team from the USSR. At that time it was rare for the Soviets to play in North America, but they were looking to tour and Hunter and the Oil Kings were eager for the publicity. The Oil Kings would go on to win the Western Canadian Hockey League championships in 1971 and 1972, and play for the Memorial Cup again in 1971.

In addition to their on-ice success, the Oil Kings were also a part of the community in Edmonton. Unlike many junior or professional teams the Oil Kings had a lot of players from the local area. When the Oil Kings won the Memorial Cup in 1966 one third of their players were from Edmonton. Within two years that number had jumped to nearly three quarters.³⁸ The Oil Kings also hosted a variety of social events. There was an annual Christmas party to which

³⁶ Hunter and Weber, 127.

³⁷ Hunter and Weber, 127.

³⁸ Hunter and Weber, 151.

the media was invited and typically was held at Charles' Beachcomber restaurant. At the beginning of every season Bill Hunter would also host a community breakfast and would sell seven hundred and fifty seats to local businesses.³⁹ Hunter claimed that "everybody wanted to be associated with us because in Edmonton, the Oil Kings were kings."⁴⁰ The importance of the Oil Kings for Edmontonians can be seen in the lineups of the soon-to-be WHA Edmonton Oilers. Former Oil Kings Glenn Hall, Ron Anderson, Doug Barrie, Ron Walters, goaltender Ken Brown, Bob Falkenberg, John Fisher, Bob Wall, Eddie Joyal, Dennis Kassian, Jack Norris, Ross Perkins, Rusty Patenaude, Bob McAneeley, Al Hamilton, and coach Ray Kinasewich were all brought back to form the core of the Edmonton Oilers (originally called the Alberta Oilers) in 1972, in the first year of the World Hockey Association.

The title of Ed Willes' book on the WHA says it all: *The Rebel League: The Short and Unruly Life of the World Hockey Association*. The league was initially conceived by Dennis Murphy, a sports promoter for California, in January 1971. Dennis Murphy had been part of the American Basketball Association. The ABA competed against the dominance of the NBA and ended up being absorbed later. Dennis Murphy believed he could do the same with hockey. The NHL had expanded to Oakland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and St. Louis in 1967, and then again to Vancouver and Buffalo in 1971, but there were still plenty of cities that wanted NHL teams. The possibility of forming an independent league, and eventually being absorbed by the bigger league was the hope of these cities. The number of cities that joined the WHA after being turned down for an NHL franchise illustrates this. Potential owners in Cleveland, Cincinnati, San Diego, Houston, Phoenix, and Edmonton all went to the WHA after being denied an NHL franchise.

³⁹ Hunter and Weber, 159, 165.

⁴⁰ Hunter and Weber, 165.

The talent in the WHA somewhat represented this. Most players in the WHA were minor league players. The Houston Aeros in its first season was built around minor league players.⁴¹ However the WHA teams always made an effort to obtain a few big-name NHL players. Bobby Hull is the best example of this. When he signed with the Winnipeg Jets he became the WHA's first marquee player. Bill Hunter, then owner of the Edmonton Oilers, claimed that each team was looking for four NHL players for their roster.⁴² Wayne Overland of the *Edmonton Journal* describes the roster of the Oilers in 1976, although it could really be any team in the WHA, as "a team of career minor-leaguers, over the hill NHLers, promising youngsters, and some legit major-leaguers"⁴³ A survey of the lineups of various teams would show Overland's statement to be true. In their first season the Philadelphia Blazers had forward Derek Sanderson and goaltender Bernie Parent as stars from the NHL amongst a team of minor-leaguers. In Houston's second season they added the aging superstar Gordie Howe and his two sons Mark and Marty so that they would have their token NHLers. Basically the WHA was a second class league, but it had enough star power to attract attention. The star players and the spectacle of the league were enough to get the CBC to air six games of the WHA's first season nationally, including the very first game of the league between the Alberta Oilers and the Ottawa Nationals. Newspapers across North America told stories of the ups and downs, the players who defected to and from the NHL, and the numerous legal battles the WHA faced during its existence.

The WHA gave the press a lot to write about. As could be expected from a young league attempting to take on the established powers, the WHA had a turbulent seven years.

⁴¹ Ed Willes, *The Rebel League: The Short and Unruly Life of the World Hockey Association*, (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 2004), 35.

⁴² Associated Press, "WHA Not Admitting NHL Players Signed," *Edmonton Journal*, January 12, 65.

⁴³ Wayne Overland, "The Wacky World of the Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, April 5, 1976, 19.

Not one year passed where a team in the WHA did not either fold or relocate. They played in rinks ranging from the Cleveland Arena which had chicken wire instead of Plexiglas, and was in such a bad a neighborhood that many players on the team had their cars stolen or were mugged.⁴⁴ There was also the building the New Jersey Knights played out of in Cherry Hill, considered the worst in the league. There were no showers in the visitors dressing room, so visiting teams would have to change in the Holiday Inn across the street. The toilets on occasion would break and spill sewage all over the bathroom floors. As well the ice surface represented a mountain bike trail more than it did a hockey surface. Close to center ice there was a large hill in the ice that players would use to propel themselves forward and get a jump on the defensemen.⁴⁵ On the other side of the spectrum, some teams played in the newest and best buildings in existence. The Oilers would eventually play in Northlands Coliseum in 1974, which was as good as any building in the National Hockey League. The building where the Cincinnati Stingers played in Richfield, Ohio was considered by many to be the best building in the hockey world.⁴⁶

The WHA also had tremendous legal troubles. At one point the WHA had forty-eight lawsuits filed against it ranging from player contracts, to arena management, to unpaid bills.⁴⁷ The league was also in almost constant merger talks with the NHL, even in its first year. Bill Hunter did not believe that the league could last more than five years without a merger.⁴⁸ The forms of the possible agreements varied and at different times included bringing twelve, six, four, two, and one team into the NHL. Harold Ballard, owner of the

⁴⁴ Willes, 110.

⁴⁵ Willes, 115.

⁴⁶ Willes, 110.

⁴⁷ Hunter and Weber, 235.

⁴⁸ Hunter and Weber, 206.

Toronto Maple Leafs, Bill Wirtz, owner of the Chicago Blackhawks, and Paul Mooney, owner of the Boston Bruins, always opposed these deals.⁴⁹

The WHA did achieve some remarkable feats, however. It ended the reserve clause in player contracts. The reserve clause allowed a team to retain the rights to a player for one year after that player's contract had expired. Essentially this allowed a team to control the player forever, unless the player chose to sit out an entire season. The WHA ignored the reserve clause when taking players away from the NHL, and therefore forced the issue to court where it was ruled illegal. The WHA also caused all players salaries to rise. The only way the WHA could get good NHL players was to pay them significantly more than any NHL team was willing to pay them. The NHL teams had no choice but to raise their salaries. In the first year of the WHA alone NHL player salaries went from an average \$28,000 to \$44,000 a year. By year six of the WHA, NHL players averaged \$96,000 a year.⁵⁰

In addition the WHA also began the importation of European players. Prior to this, most people considered European players weak and less talented than North Americans. The Winnipeg Jets proved this wrong when they signed Anders Hedberg, Ulf Nilsson and Lars-Erik Sjoberg. Hedberg and Nilsson teamed up with Bobby Hull to form the best line in the WHA, and it likely would have been one of the best in the NHL.⁵¹ The new breed of hockey that developed from a synthesis of European speed and skill and North American tenacity changed the game from the comically violent hockey being played successfully in the NHL by teams like the Philadelphia Flyers, nicknamed "The Broadstreet Bullies."⁵² On top of all this the WHA

⁴⁹ Willes, 246-247.

⁵⁰ Willes, 37.

⁵¹ Willes, 174.

⁵² Willes, 191.

ultimately brought perceived major league status to a number of cities that may have had no chance of this otherwise. Edmonton, as was mentioned, was one of those cities.

Edmonton was buzzing about the new league and its new team a year before play started. According to Wayne Overland people in the city were positive about the new league and a new arena.⁵³ The Oilers and the City of Edmonton had agreed to a new \$15 million arena which would be built on the Edmonton Exhibition grounds, but it would not be ready until at least the 1973-1974 season. It actually ended up being ready for use in November, 1974. Until then the Oilers had to play in the 5,200 seat Edmonton Gardens. Most of the buzz surrounding the new league involved the players. Rumors were constantly being circulated about which NHLers were going to leave the NHL and come to play for the WHA. Three big names that were thrown around from the beginning were Bobby Hull, Derek Sanderson, and Ken Dryden.⁵⁴ So many rumors circulated that often times people from the WHA, like Bill Hunter, would have to publicly dispel them. On January 12, 1972 after the St. Paul Pioneer Press had reported that Ken Dryden, Phil Roberto and Stan Gilberton had all signed and that sixty more NHLers were going to sign within thirty days, Bill Hunter came out and said that at that time no NHLers had signed with the WHA. He did, however, add that he believed that somewhere around seventy NHLers would sign with the WHA because the new league would have better salaries, pensions, and insurance plans.⁵⁵ Once some NHLers had signed with the WHA, the press immediately announced the implications for Edmonton. In August the press was already hyping Derek Sanderson coming to town to play against the Oilers on October 20th.⁵⁶ All of these rumors and the potential for star talent served to increase people in Edmonton's sense that the new league

⁵³ Wayne Overland, "Age Old Chicken versus Egg Debate," *Edmonton Journal*, October 6, 1971, 76.

⁵⁴ Wayne Overland, "New League Knows NHL Will Attack," *Edmonton Journal*, October 14, 1971, 60.

⁵⁵ Associated Press, "WHA Not Admitting NHL Players signed," *Edmonton Journal*, January 12, 1972, 65.

⁵⁶ Wayne Overland, "Oilers Open to Roar of Golden Jet," *Edmonton Journal*, August 18, 1972, 58.

would be big league with big league players. Other discussions revolved around what the new league would mean for local and minor league players. The new league was rumored to offer a chance for the University of Alberta Golden Bears goaltender at the time, Barry Richardson, who at age twenty-six would be overlooked by many minor and major league teams.⁵⁷ Increased opportunities for members of the Edmonton Oil Kings were also emphasized.

The announcement on August 25, 1972 that Edmonton had won its bid for the 1978 Commonwealth Games added to Edmontonians' optimism that it was becoming a national if not world-class city. The battle for hosting the 1978 Commonwealth Games had come down to Edmonton and Leeds, England. Leeds was the favorite going into the final vote because of the cheaper cost of travel for the African countries. However, Air Canada offered discount travel for countries coming to Edmonton for the games, and Edmonton ended up winning the vote. For Edmonton this was not only a sign of international recognition, but also an opportunity to get a variety of new facilities, such as a replacement for its aging football venue, Clarke Stadium. This sense of importance carried over to the Oilers when they began play two months later in October 1972.

The Oilers had a dramatic first season. They had stolen away well known NHL players like defenseman Al Hamilton from the Buffalo Sabres and forward Jim Harrison of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Jim Harrison's signing with Oilers was somewhat of a spectacle. Bill Hunter reportedly rolled a shopping cart with \$75,000 up to Harrison's door when he signed the contract. Al Hamilton would continue to be a star for the Oilers throughout their years in the WHA, and would eventually be the first player to have his number retired by the Oilers and have a banner hung from the rafters in the Coliseum. Jim Harrison played a couple good years with the team before his bad attitude led to his trade in the fall of 1974. The Oilers won the first

⁵⁷ Jim Matheson, "Richardson Would Like a Good Honest Chance," *Edmonton Journal*, January 12, 1972, 65.

game ever of the WHA on national television against the Ottawa Nationals by a score of 7 to 4, and won their first game at home against the Winnipeg Jets 3-2. A quarter of the way through the season the Oilers were tied for first place in the Western Division with the Winnipeg Jets. However, after Christmas the Oilers' performance began to slip. Bill Hunter eventually fired Ray Kinasewich and took over himself in an attempt to turn the team around. Even after Hunter took over coaching the Oilers continued to fall. At the end of February the Oilers went on an eight-game losing streak and ended up in fifth place in their division. The problem according to now head coach Bill Hunter was that the players were not all playing well at the same time. One game the goaltender Jack Norris would be phenomenal, but the skaters would not perform. The next game the players would be firing, but Norris would let in a number of soft goals.⁵⁸ The Oilers also had eight games where they had lost by only one goal since Hunter had taken over coaching. With eleven games left the Oilers were nine points back of a playoff spot. However in their last twelve games the team lost only twice, and after beating Minnesota on the last game of the season were tied with them for third place in the division and the last playoff spot. After a controversial debate about how it should be determined which team got into the playoffs, the league owners decided to follow the bylaws they had set prior to the start of the first season and have a one game playoff series to determine who got the last playoff spot. Hunter and the fans in Edmonton were furious because they believed that because they had a better divisional record they should advance to the playoffs, but nonetheless the game was held. The Minnesota Fighting Saints and the Alberta Oilers played on April 4th in Calgary. Calgary was chosen as a supposedly neutral site; however, three thousand Oilers fans flocked from Edmonton to see the game in the middle of the week.⁵⁹ Disappointingly the Oilers lost the game to Minnesota

⁵⁸ Wayne Overland, "Professor Hunter's Newest Math," *Edmonton Journal*, March 13, 1973, 48.

⁵⁹ Wayne Overland, "Tremendous Year for Bill, Oilers, Edmonton," *Edmonton Journal*, April 5, 1973, 53.

and missed the playoffs in the first year of the WHA. In retrospect it is not surprising that the Oilers missed the playoffs. Jack Norris was a good goaltender, but not always consistent. Jim Harrison, the team's number one scorer, was only fourteenth overall in scoring and was the only Oiler to crack the top twenty-eight.

The reaction to the Oilers by the fans paralleled the ups and downs of the Oilers' season. Fans were hesitant to immediately accept the Oilers with open arms. The WHA was after all a new league, and fans knew that the WHA may fold before the year was up. As a result Edmontonians attuned themselves to the status regarding the success or failure of the league. *Edmonton Journal* sportswriter Terry Jones claimed that the first things fans wanted to know wasn't the score, but the attendance of the previous night's game.⁶⁰ As well news stories about the WHA could be seen constantly in the *Edmonton Journal* at this time. This included everything from the legal battle over the rights to Bobby Hull, to the financial situations of other teams around the league. Fans did support the new team, however. Most crowds at the Edmonton Gardens were near capacity, and the November 15, 1972 game between Edmonton and the Winnipeg Jets sold out. Although, it is doubtful that this was the reaction people like Bill Hunter was looking for.

Most telling though about the initial reaction of fans to the Oilers was the effect the new team had on the long established Oil Kings. In the first few months the Oil Kings lost 2000 fans per game on average, down from an average 3,389 per game the year before to a meager 1,687 per game since the Oilers began playing. Considering how important the Oil Kings were to Edmonton, as was shown previously, their quick dismissal suggests that the fans viewed the Oilers as being in a league above the junior team. Attendance for the Oilers' games started to slip along with the team's performance in the winter and early spring, but was back to

⁶⁰ Terry Jones, "Crowds Down as Juniors Battle Pros," *Edmonton Journal*, November 24, 1972, 34.

normal by the end of the season. After the season was over many people came to believe that the Oilers were actually major league. Wayne Overland said, "There can be no doubt that Edmonton is ready to support major league hockey. Nor can there be any doubt that the Oilers and the WHA are major league."⁶¹ Some people began to claim that the WHA was now in the driver's seat in the merger negotiations that were going between it and the NHL.⁶² However, these celebrations were somewhat premature as later years would soon show.

The Oilers' second season was much more successful than their first. Bill Hunter named Brian Shaw, coach of the Oil Kings the previous year, the new head coach of the Oilers in the off season. The Oilers also added a number of players to boost their roster including forwards Ron Climie and Brian McKenzie, and big hitter Jack McCrimmon among others. Climie and McKenzie teamed up with Jim Harrison to form the "power-line", the Oilers' number one line. The Oilers started out the season winning eight games in a row, and continued to win ten of their first eleven. It should be noted that the Oilers played the Vancouver Blazers, who had relocated from Philadelphia that year, eight times in their first thirteen games. In December the Oilers were six points ahead of the Houston Aeros and first in the Western Division, and goaltender Jack Norris was number one in the league with a 2.35 goals against average. However, the Oilers still lacked scoring. Once again the Oilers went into a slump after Christmas. The team was plagued with injuries; they lost Jim Harrison, Ed Joyal, Steve Carlyle, and Tom Gilmore all before spring. The Oilers lost a series of games to Vancouver and Los Angeles, two of the worst teams in the league, and in March were in danger of not making the playoffs. However, they were able to pull themselves together and clinch third place weeks

⁶¹ Wayne Overland, "Tremendous Year for Bill, Oilers, Edmonton," *Edmonton Journal*, April 5, 1973, 53.

⁶² Jim Coleman, "WHA Boys Just Grew Up Too Fast for the NHL," *Edmonton Journal*, April 4, 1973, 69.

before the playoffs. Brian Shaw claimed that Rusty Perkins really stepped up to pull the team out of its tailspin, but Al Hamilton won the team's Most Valuable Player award.⁶³ Jack Norris finished with the fifth-best goals against average in the league, and yet was still criticized by fans and the media for being inconsistent.⁶⁴ Once again they only had one person in the league's top scorers. This time it was Ron Climie who had 38 goals and 36 assists for a total of 74 points, finishing 16th overall. The flu bug hit the Oilers before playoff time and took out nine of the team's players including Jack Norris, Ron Climie, and Jack McCrimmon. The Oilers faced Minnesota in the playoffs, and lost the first three games in a row. They managed to win the fourth game, but lost the fifth game and the series four games to one.

The Oilers became more popular in Edmonton over their second season, and the WHA appeared more stable. Season ticket sales increased from 1,500 the year before to 2,500 in the second season despite prices going up.⁶⁵ Eleven of the twelve teams added players from the NHL to their roster causing some to argue that the WHA was quickly making up ground on the established league. The only team that did not add players was the Vancouver Blazers who lost both Derek Sanderson and goaltender Bernie Parent back to the NHL. Many critics, including Mark Mulvoy of *Sports Illustrated*, argued that the previous year's WHA champion the New England Whalers would have made the playoffs in the NHL, and would be roughly comparable to Philadelphia Flyers or the Buffalo Sabres.⁶⁶ Bill Hunter in his usual boosterist manner declared that the Edmonton Oilers were good enough to make the

⁶³ Wayne Overland, "Short on Talent But Long on Heart," *Edmonton Journal*, April 1, 1974, 45.

⁶⁴ Wayne Overland, "No Secret Why Oilers are in Trouble," *Edmonton Journal*, April 11, 1974, 27.

⁶⁵ Wayne Overland, "Oilers Ticket Packs Deflates Inflation," *Edmonton Journal*, October 19, 1973, 69.

⁶⁶ Wayne Overland, "WHA Rapidly Bridging the Gap with the NHL," *Edmonton Journal*, October 17, 1973, 75.

playoffs in the NHL that coming year.⁶⁷ Emphasizing the parity between WHA and NHL teams was important because it suggested that the two leagues were not that different, and thus the WHA was major league. People who claimed that the WHA was not major league were ridiculed in the *Edmonton Journal*.⁶⁸ This was a change from the previous year when there were open debates in Edmonton about the caliber of the WHA. The next two seasons, however, would challenge many fans' loyalty.

A pattern in the Oilers' seasons began to emerge in the third year. The Oilers again added talent to the team. To fix their apparent goaltending problems the Oilers acquired goaltending legend Jacques Plante. Many people rightfully questioned Plante's ability to play at age forty-five, but it did add a big name to the Oiler's roster. Hunter claimed that during the season people would ask if Plante was playing, and if he was the game would sell out.⁶⁹ The Oilers also added rookie Mike Rogers who would end up being their leading scorer that year. However, they traded Ron Climie to the New England Whalers for Tim Sheehy in the middle of the season. They also traded Jim Harrison for Ron Buchanan of the Cleveland Crusaders after Harrison walked out of practice in October and was subsequently suspended. Interestingly Ron Buchanan would be traded back to Cleveland later that year for Murray Kennett. At the beginning of the season Edmonton played very few games due to scheduling conflicts because the Coliseum was not yet ready. At one point they had only played five games when other teams like Vancouver and Houston had played eleven. For the rest of the season the Oilers record would look much worse than it was because they had played on average six games less than the other teams. The Coliseum finally opened to rave reviews and a full house on 11 November 1974 for a game between the Edmonton Oilers and the Cleveland

⁶⁷ Wayne Overland, "WHA Rapidly Bridging the Gap with the NHL," *Edmonton Journal*, October 17, 1973, 75.

⁶⁸ Wayne Overland, "Benny 'The Beefer' Won't Like This," *Edmonton Journal*, October 24, 1973, 69.

⁶⁹ Hunter and Weber, 233.

Crusaders, which the Oilers won 4-1. The capacity crowd of 15,326 set the WHA attendance record. This was also the first game back for Jim Harrison, who got booed by fans every time he touched the puck.⁷⁰ Until Christmas the Oilers played well and had the best win-loss ratio in the league. However, in the middle of the season the Oilers dismantled one of their top lines when they traded Ron Buchanan back to the Cleveland Crusaders and Ron Climie to the New England Whalers. These two had played with the rookie Mike Rogers. After Christmas the Oilers once again had the injury bug. Star defenseman Al Hamilton cracked his knee cap when he ran into the net in a game in December. In addition the Oilers also lost Ron McKay and Steve Carlyle. Jacques Plante was playing stellar in net, but he only played home games. Chris Worthy and Ken Brown were splitting the away games. The Oilers still managed to win games in January, but barely. At the end of the month they had a 19-11-1 record which was the best in their division. After that, however, the Oilers lost the majority of their games. Hunter took over coaching again in the spring, but he could not bring the team back to life. The Oilers finished with 36 wins, 38 losses, and 4 ties, which put them last place in the Canadian division. Many people blamed Al Hamilton's injury for the Oilers' poor performance, including sports journalist Wayne Overland.⁷¹ However, it seems as though the team just could not score. Mike Rogers led the team in scoring that year with 34 goals, 45 assists, and a total of 79 points. He was the only Oiler in the top twenty scorers in the NHL, and was fifteenth overall. Goaltending also appears to have been a factor.

Although most considered Edmonton's goaltending adequate,⁷² they had no single goalie with a top ten goals against average.

⁷⁰ Wayne Overland, "Oilers Rally to Win," *Edmonton Journal*, November 11, 1974, 21.

⁷¹ Wayne Overland, "Hamilton's Injury Ruined Oiler's Hopes," *Edmonton Journal*, April 1, 1975, 27.

⁷² Wayne Overland, "Season Ticket Holders Upset with Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, April 2, 1975, 51.

Many fans were angry at the Oilers after their third season. Edmonton had started the season with 5000 season ticket holders, the most in the WHA. The Oilers also managed to average 12,400 fans during a home stand in November in which they competed against an Eskimo playoff game.⁷³ Many fans at the end of the season threatened to cancel their season tickets due to the poor performance by the Oilers.⁷⁴ However, attendance stayed high and the fans stuck with the team. 10,729 fans attended the Oilers versus the Nordiques on April 1st, the last game of the season. The WHA also appeared to be doing well. Attendance overall was up 49.5% over the previous season, and now averaged 7,419 per game.⁷⁵ Debates about the status of the WHA and Edmonton had become difficult to find. The following year, however, some criticisms would return.

The fourth season for the Edmonton Oilers was somewhat of a contradiction. The three big additions for the Oilers in that season were Clare Drake, who had just led the University of Alberta Golden Bears to a Canadian Intercollegiate Sport national championship the year before, as the new head coach, Norm Ullman from the Detroit Red Wings, and goaltender Dave Dryden as a replacement for Jacques Plante. The Oilers traded Mike Rogers to the New England Whalers for Wayne Carleton and Paul Hurley, meaning that once again they had traded away their leading scorer from the previous year. The team started out a dismal 4-6-2. Fans criticized their lack of hitting. A good illustration of this can be found in a game against the Whalers. One of the Oilers hit a member of the Whalers, and in retaliation the Whalers hit three different Oilers in short succession. After that the Oilers did not hit another Whaler for a significant part of the game.⁷⁶ The top line forward Ken Baird was the Oilers'

⁷³ Wayne Overland, "What Manner of Mistake is This?" *Edmonton Journal*, November 19, 1974, 73.

⁷⁴ Wayne Overland, "Season Ticket Holders Upset with Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, April 2, 1975, 51.

⁷⁵ Canadian Press, "WHA Attendance Mark Could Pass Four Million," *Edmonton Journal*, April 1, 1975, 29.

⁷⁶ Wayne Overland, "Why the Oilers Aren't a Hit," *Edmonton Journal*, November 1, 1975, 61.

biggest fighter that season, and it affected his play. By November, however, the Oilers were third place in the Canadian division and only two points behind the Winnipeg Jets. From then on the Oilers' performance was poor. After losing nine games in a row just after Christmas, Hunter once again took over coaching duties, firing Clare Drake. Hunter did not do much better. Despite their poor performance a change in the playoff system gave the Oilers a shot at the post-season. That year the WHA had decided to allow the top four out of five teams in the Canadian division to make the playoffs. So with two games left the Oilers were sitting in fourth, four points up on the Toronto Toros, but the Toros had two more games to play than the Oilers. What occurred was less of a playoff race and more of a race to the golf courses. Neither Edmonton nor Toronto could win a game. The only team Edmonton could beat oddly enough was the Winnipeg Jets, who were number one in the league. The Oilers only won three games out of their last eleven; all of which were against the Jets. Nonetheless, the Toros won less than that, and the Oilers were guaranteed a playoff spot the afternoon prior to their last game because of a Toronto loss. Norm Ullman led the team in scoring in the regular season, but no Oiler made it into the top ten scorers in the league. Goaltender Dave Dryden had a 4.01 goals against average. The Oilers' playoff hopes were strangely optimistic, regardless of their regular season performance. This was because they played Winnipeg (The team they had beaten in their previous three contests) in the first round of the playoffs. However, Winnipeg apparently took the playoffs a lot more seriously, and beat Edmonton four games straight.

The title of a Terry Jones article in the *Edmonton Journal* sums up fan sentiments after the Oilers fourth season: "Situation Grave, But Not Serious."⁷⁷ Many fans were more disappointed with the Oilers after their fourth year despite making the playoffs. However, most were willing to blame Bill Hunter for the problems rather than the team itself. 85% of

⁷⁷ Terry Jones, "Situation Grave, But Not Serious," *Edmonton Journal*, April 17, 1976.

respondents to an *Edmonton Journal* poll claimed that Hunter was at least partially to blame for the team's lack of success and 60.8% said that he was fully responsible. Only 4.2% blamed Clare Drake, and even fewer blamed the players.⁷⁸ A letter from Oilers' fan Art Moore illustrates Edmonton fans' opinions. Art Moore said: "I believe Hunter is due considerable credit for bringing Edmonton major league hockey but it appears that the business of hockey has passed him by and until the major shareholders take steps to correct the situation the main people who stand to lose the most are the Edmonton hockey fans."⁷⁹ Wayne Overland basically repeats this statement in an article on April 17, 1976.⁸⁰ From this it is clear that fans had accepted that the Oilers offered big league hockey. Even in their anger and disappointment, fans were quick to comment on the major league status of the WHA and the Edmonton Oilers. The years that followed would validate their beliefs.

The Oilers continued to struggle after their fourth season, however. Bill Hunter took a cue from the fans and gave control of the team to businessmen Nelson Skalbania and Peter Pocklington, both of whom had bought into the Oilers earlier that year. In addition, new head coach and general manager Bep Guidolin was added to the team. The Oilers also added Glen Sather, top prospect, rookie Frank Beaton, and goalie Ken Broderick to the team. For the first part of the season Broderick shared the goaltending job with Dave Dryden. Despite the management change, the Oilers started out the year poorly. Twenty games into the season the Oilers were last place in the Western Division with 8 wins, 12 losses, and no ties. The team's main problem was against opponents from their own division. In division play, the Oilers had 1 win and 10 losses. Against teams from the East the Oilers had a 7-2 record.⁸¹ They continued to maintain their sub-

⁷⁸ Wayne Overland, "Hunter Leads 'Unpopular' Poll of Public," *Edmonton Journal*, January 6, 1976, 23.

⁷⁹ Art Moore, "Blame Lies with Hunter," *Edmonton Journal*, January 6, 1976, 21.

⁸⁰ Wayne Overland, Untitled, *Edmonton Journal*, April 17, 1976, 55.

⁸¹ Jim Matheson, "The Kid holds fire on Howe," *Edmonton Journal*, November 22, 1976, 63.

par position throughout the winter. At the end of January the Oilers were 19-26-1, and were in fourth place in the division. However, the two teams below them, Calgary and Phoenix, had both played less games than the Oilers. When the Minnesota Fighting Saints folded that month, the Oilers added goaltender Louis Levasseur. At the time he was considered the hottest free agent on the market.⁸² The team traded Dryden to New England, but he refused to report to his new team. For the remainder of the season he stayed in Edmonton, and attempted to settle on the remaining two years of his contract.⁸³

To help the team's scoring the Oilers added Bill "Cowboy" Flett from the Atlanta Flames of the NHL. In the spring Peter Pocklington bought Nelson Skalbania's shares of the team and became the sole owner. Bep Guidolin was also fired as head coach after going 25-36-2, and was replaced by player-coach Glen Sather. Guidolin, however, remained general manager. At the end of March there was a lot of gossip about a merger with the NHL, and the topic was discussed nearly every day in the *Edmonton Journal*. The Oilers' representative at the merger talks said there was about a 70% chance of a merge.⁸⁴ However, at the beginning of April talks fell through for an unpublished reason, and many fans were disheartened.

The mood of fans was changed when Edmonton made a run for the playoffs at the end of the season. In March, the Calgary Cowboys had a five point lead on the Oilers and two games in hand, but Calgary lost ten games in a row during a ten game road trip. This allowed Edmonton, who went 7-6-1 during the same period, to climb back into fourth place in the Western Division, and have the last playoff spot with four games remaining in the season. The team played the next two games against Calgary, and lost the first and tied the second. However, they won their last two games and finished in fourth place, three points ahead of Calgary with a record of 34

⁸² Terry Jones, "Oilers new art unimpressive," *Edmonton Journal*, January 21, 1977, 41.

⁸³ Jim Matheson, "Levasseur agrees to long term deal," *Edmonton Journal*, January 28, 1977, 85.

⁸⁴ Terry Jones, Untitled, *Edmonton Journal*, April 1, 1977, 97.

wins, 43 losses, and 4 ties. Overall the team was much deeper than it had been in previous years. That year the team had nine players with fifteen or more goals.⁸⁵ Cowboy Flett had been a great addition; he scored 34 goals in 48 games. Ken Broderick had also taken back the starting goalie position from the supposed hot-shot Louis Levasseur.

The Oilers met the Houston Aeros in the first round of the playoffs. The Oilers were an underdog from the start. They had the worst record of any team in the playoffs, and Houston had 106 points and the best record in the league. Houston won the first two games at home, but the Oilers managed a 7 to 2 victory in game three at the Coliseum in Edmonton. Houston, however, won the next game in Edmonton, and then took the series 4-1 at home. Randy Rota, who was acquired mid-season, was considered the best player for Edmonton during the series.⁸⁶ Despite the team's poor performance in the regular season, Jim Matheson claimed that "it was an honest ending to an improved year."⁸⁷ There was optimism that the next season would be even better.

This optimism may have been a bit premature, however. The WHA shifted its organization so that beginning in the 1977-1978 season there was only one division made up of eight teams, and the top five teams would make the playoffs. The team also shuffled its ranks significantly during the off season. Dave Dryden came back as a back-up goaltender for Ken Broderick. Broderick, however, would be traded shortly into the season for goaltender Don "Smokey" McLeod from Quebec, and Dave Dryden would resume his position as starting goalie. A new captain, Paul Shmyr was added, along with Ron Chipperfeld, and Dave Semenko. Two of the three remaining original Oilers, Rusty Patenuade and Doug Barrie, left the team, leaving Al Hamilton as the only original Oiler. At the beginning of the season Glen Sather claimed that

⁸⁵ Jim Matheson, "Oilers next playoff victory will be its second," *Edmonton Journal*, April 11, 1977, 58.

⁸⁶ Jim Matheson, "Game Oilers succumb to Aero's onslaught," *Edmonton Journal*, April 27, 1977, 43.

⁸⁷ Jim Matheson, 43.

the Oilers were a much better team that season; however, eight games into the season the Oilers had a record of 2-6-0 and were in sixth place in the West.⁸⁸ The original confidence that people had in the goaltending was shaken, and led to the previously mentioned trade of Broderick. Unlike previous years the Oilers were playing really hard, but making bad mistakes which were costing them games. In seven of their eight games the Oilers outshot their opponents, but lost the game after making a mistake in the third period.⁸⁹ The team managed to pick up its game a bit, and got to fourth place in the division with a record of 16 wins, 16 losses, and 1 tie, by the beginning of January. On 4 January 1978, the Oilers played against the Soviet Nationals, which included players like Vladislav Tretiak and Valeri Kharlamov. The Oilers had played against European teams in the past, but the game on January 4th set the record for the highest attendance for a hockey game in Edmonton with 15,602 attendees.⁹⁰ The Soviets defeated the Oilers 7-2 based mostly on the superb goaltending of Tretiak.

The Oilers second half of the season lacked the hard work of the first. After they reached fourth place their efforts declined, and they soon found themselves in fifth place in the division. They fought to keep fifth place and the last spot in the playoffs, but after losing thirteen of nineteen games in February and March, the sixth place Birmingham Bulls were gaining on them. With a chance to guarantee themselves a playoff spot on a March 31st game against Birmingham, the Oilers spoiled it by losing 5-2. However, the Bulls did not continue to win, and the Oilers kept their playoff spot, and finished the season with a 38-39-3 record. Regardless of their lack of success and only barely making the playoffs, the Oilers set their personal record for attendance for the year with a total attendance of 433,150, beating their previous record of 415,150 set in the 1974-1975 season. The Oilers also had

⁸⁸ Terry Jones, Untitled, *Edmonton Journal*, November 3, 1977, 101.

⁸⁹ Jim Matheson, "Oilers vs. Jets: there's no justice," *Edmonton Journal*, November 3, 1977, 101.

⁹⁰ Jim Matheson, "Tretiak takes the heart out of the Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, January 5, 1978, F1.

six sellouts during the season. Blair McDonald was named Most Valuable Player for the team, and Cowboy Flett was the leading scorer with 41 goals, 48 assists for a total of 89 points. Once again Al Hamilton was named favorite player, and best defenseman. Dave Dryden led the team with a 3.48 goals against average.⁹¹

The Oilers played the New England Whalers in the first round of the playoffs. In a similar fashion to the previous year the Oilers lost the first two games on the road, but came home to win 2-0. In game four at home the Oilers, however, were beaten 9-1. The Oilers then lost game five 4-1 in Springfield, Massachusetts, and therefore the series four games to one. One of the main reasons the Oilers lost was that the defense did not perform well.⁹² Roughly the same opinions of the team existed at the end of the 1977-1978 season as did at the end of the previous season. Fans believed that things had been worse and things were probably going to get better.⁹³ This time they were right.

The Oilers' last season in the WHA started out poorly. The work ethic the team had shown in the previous season had disappeared. The only player that managed to play well consistently was Brett Callighen, and he was by far not the teams most talented player.⁹⁴ The Oilers had 3 wins and 5 losses in their first 8 games of the season, and were in sixth place in the league. This all changed when the team acquired the seventeen year old phenomenon Wayne Gretzky from the Indianapolis Racers. The Racers were in cash, and so in the same trade deal the Oilers also acquired goaltender Ed Mio, and player Peter Driscoll for cash and future considerations (the latter would be meaningless when the Racers folded seventeen games later). By the beginning of January the Oilers had a record of 17-15-0 and were in fourth place, one

⁹¹ Jim Matheson, "It's a record at Oiler gates," *Edmonton Journal*, April 8, 1978, H1.

⁹² Jim Matheson, "Whalers embarrass Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, April 22, 1978, H1.

⁹³ Terry Jones, Untitled, *Edmonton Journal*, April 24, 1978, H1.

⁹⁴ Terry Jones, Untitled, *Edmonton Journal*, November 1, 1978, H1.

point up on the Winnipeg Jets. During the month of January, Cowboy Flett went on a twelve game scoring streak breaking Rusty Patenaude's record of eleven games set in 1973-1974.⁹⁵ The Oilers dropped to fifth place behind the Jets for a while during the winter, but then really turned it on during the spring. In the last two months of the season the Oilers went 22-7-2, and took over first place in the league. By April fans knew that this would be the last year of the WHA, and that the Oilers would be entering the NHL with three other teams: the New England Whalers, the Winnipeg Jets, and the Quebec Nordiques. This gave the season more importance because if the Oilers wanted to have any success in the WHA it would have to be during that season. The Oilers finished the season in first place for the first time in their history, eleven points ahead of the second place Quebec Nordiques. Wayne Gretzky led the team in scoring and was sixth overall in the WHA with 35 goals and 53 assists for a total of 88 points. He also won the Lou Kaplan award for Rookie of the Year in the WHA. The Oilers' previous year's MVP, Blair McDonald, did not do as well. He had an eight game scoreless streak in October and a seven game scoreless streak in March.⁹⁶ Dave Dryden earned his starting goaltender job by having 2.89 goals against average, and winning the Ben Hatskin trophy for best goaltender and the Gordie Howe trophy for Most Valuable Player in the WHA.

By getting first place in the league the Oilers had a bye in the first round of the playoffs. In the semi-finals they met the New England Whalers. The Oilers won game one and two, 6-2 and 9-5 respectively. The Whalers then won games 3 and 4 at home. The Oilers won game five again by a wide margin, this time 5-2. The Whalers won again at home in game six, but the Oilers won game seven decisively 6-3, which at one point was 6-1. Edmonton then played the Winnipeg Jets in the last Avco Cup final. The Oilers lost the first two games at home, 3-1 and

⁹⁵ Jim Matheson, "Shmyr's safe pass wasn't," *Edmonton Journal*, January 10, 1979, H1.

⁹⁶ Jim Matheson, "Flying Finn spoils debut of new coach," *Edmonton Journal*, April 2, 1979, C1.

3-2 before coming back to win game three 8-3. The Jets, however, made the series 3-1 when they beat the Oilers 5-4 in game four. Facing elimination at home in game five the Oilers decimated the Jets 10-2, but then lost the series in game six by a score of 7-3. One of the biggest complaints against the Oilers throughout the playoffs was that they could not win a close game.⁹⁷ As can be seen all of their victories were by at least three goals. In addition Dave Dryden, the league MVP, did not play well in net for the Oilers.⁹⁸ More than the Oilers failure, however, was the stellar performance of the Winnipeg Jets. Coach Tommy McVie, goalie Gary Smith, and defensemen Lars-Erik Sjoberg were key factors in Winnipeg's victory, and all did not start working with the team until late February for various reasons.⁹⁹

The Oilers finished in the WHA as the only team to have been in the league for its entirety and not win the Avco Cup. The Oilers also scored the first, the last regular season, and the last goal ever in the WHA. Despite its lack of success the fans stuck by the team, and their patience was rewarded when the following year the Oilers were among four teams from the WHA to enter the NHL. By entering the NHL the Oilers put any and all doubts that they were not a major league franchise and that Edmonton was not a major league city to rest.

The Edmonton Oilers helped transform the city from a regional center of Alberta into a national-city, in the minds of Edmontonians. Edmonton, though booming in the 1970s, did not have any major attractions to make it noticeable on the national stage. In 1971 Vancouver got an NHL franchise, the Canucks, which brought it into the nation's eye. People in Edmonton, and Bill Hunter in particular, made attempts to get an NHL team, but they failed. The new start up league, the World Hockey Association, offered Edmontonians this chance. The league was accepted hesitantly at first, but within a few years people no longer questioned its caliber or the

⁹⁷ Terry Jones, "Paul Shmyr is captain of the Oilers," *Edmonton Journal*, May 19, 1979, C1.

⁹⁸ Jim Matheson, "Fairy-tale for the Winnipeg Jets," *Edmonton Journal*, May 21, 1979, F1.

⁹⁹ Matheson, F1.

cities represented within it. The boosters had succeeded in swaying people's opinion in favor of the team. By the third year of the league many teams had state of the art facilities rivaling anything in the NHL. The coverage may not have been as good as that of the NHL, but the WHA and its teams made news across the continent. Cities that had been denied access to an NHL franchise had found success through the WHA, including Edmonton. The city had flirted with major league status during the years with the WHA, but when the WHA merged with the NHL in 1979, Edmonton was granted what it had been looking for to begin with, an NHL franchise. By 1980 the city of Edmonton had one of the best arenas in the National Hockey League, and was mentioned nationwide alongside metropolises like Montreal, Toronto, New York, Chicago, and Detroit. The World Hockey Association and the Edmonton Oilers helped to make that possible.

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Buffalo will host the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday. by Chris Ryndak @ChrisRyndak / Sabres.com. Happy New Year, Sabres fans. The team will move on from last night's disappointing 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning when they return to practice this afternoon. We'll have full coverage for you here on Sabres.com. Their next game is Thursday against the Edmonton Oilers at KeyBank Center at 7 p.m. Tickets are on sale now. Here's what you need to know. A look back at last night. Video: BUF Recap: Sheary collects three points in 6-4 loss. From the Postgame Reportâ€¦ Special teams once aga