National Hockey League

# BRAND ASSESSMENT

*Brand Strength Pyramid & DRUM Analysis*

KRISTIAN NIKULA 52117415
MANAGING STRONG BRANDS



# THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE IS A PROFESSIONAL ICE HOCKEY LEAGUE IN NORTH AMERICA COMPOSED OF 32 TEAMS. THE NHL IS ONE OF THE MAJOR PROFESSIONAL SPORTS LEAGUES IN NORTH AMERICA AND IS CONSIDERED THE PREMIER ICE HOCKEY LEAGUE IN THE WORLD.




### Why the NHL

My background in hockey media drew me to the ice hockey industry, and the NHL is the strongest brand in it. It's worth assessing because:

- **It's strong but not leading:** record revenue (Statista, 2025c) and attendance (Rial, 2026), yet still #4 of five North American leagues by revenue (Statista, 2025a, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).
- **It has untapped demand:** European interest is high, but time zones block access. Viewing jumps 370% when games start at a time that suits Europe (SportBusiness, 2024).
- **It carries the whole sport:** as the top league, how the NHL markets itself shapes how ice hockey is seen worldwide.
- **It has to win Gen Z:** only 5% of young US adults (18 to 29) favour hockey, against 13% for basketball (Jones, 2024). The 2026 Olympics (Axios, 2026) and playoffs (Whyno, 2026) show new fans are coming.

↗ Market

# MARKET PERFORMANCE

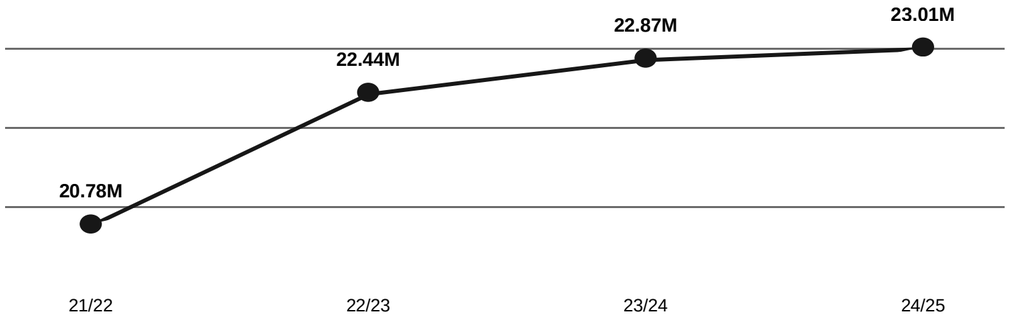
**Sales are growing:** revenue is up from $5.09B (2018/19) to $7.94B (2024/25), and attendance has set a record four seasons running (23.16M in 2025/26).

BUT

Every big North American league grew, so revenue alone says little about market share. The audience matters more: the NHL is #4 of the five major North American leagues and is losing young, casual US fans to the NBA (13% vs 5% of young adults).

## Record attendance four seasons running

Regular season attendance, millions (axis starts at 20M)

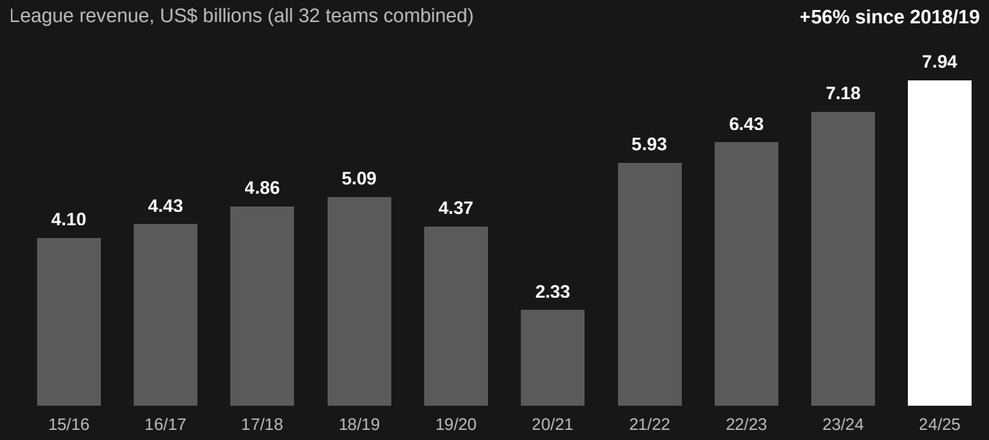



Source: Statista (2025b). 2025/26 set a fourth straight record: 23.16M (Rial, 2026).

2026

## NHL revenue keeps setting records

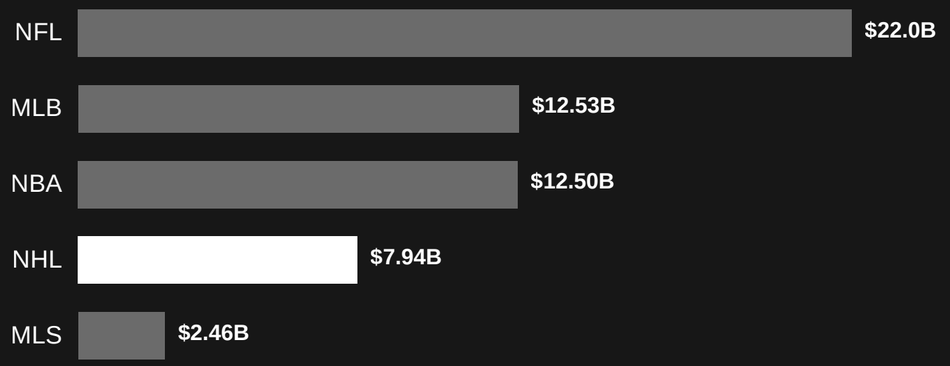
League revenue, US$ billions (all 32 teams combined)




Source: Statista (2025c).

## #4 of the big North American leagues

League revenue, latest season (NFL, MLB and MLS 2025, NBA and NHL 2024/25), US$ billions




Sources: Statista (2025a, 2025c, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). MLS = sum of all 30 clubs. NFL 2025 = estimate.

↗ Segments

2026

# FANS OF THE NHL

- Fans of team, aggressive sports such as hockey score high on excitement, group affiliation and family motives, which makes the game a shared, social experience (Wann et al., 2008).
- NHL fandom is intense but narrow: 8.4% of Americans are NHL super fans, 4th of five US leagues, while 36% are apathetic toward it (Lewis, 2025).




## Primary segment: US & Canada core fans

Canada and northern US. Millennials are the strongest fans (12.4% super fans vs 7.6% of Gen Z)

- **Functional:** live games, local TV
- **Emotional:** city pride, tradition
- **Self-expressive:** jerseys, team identity

## Growth segment: Gen Z & casual US

Age 18 to 29, US, mostly on mobile. 5% favour hockey vs 13% basketball

- **Functional:** free clips and highlights
- **Emotional:** stars, rivalries, drama
- **Self-expressive:** style and culture

## Growth segment: Women fans

37% of hockey fans, +26% since 2016 (The Canadian Press, 2022). Women's playoff viewing +66% in 2026, helped by the Olympics and 'Heated Rivalry' (Whyno, 2026)

- **Functional:** easy access, watching with others
- **Emotional:** storylines, personalities
- **Self-expressive:** belonging (NHL Unites)

## Growth segment: European fans

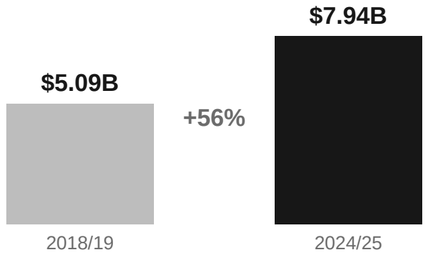
Follow hockey: Finland 40%, Sweden 24%, Switzerland 19%, Austria 9% (Dsouza, 2025). Over a quarter of NHL players are European (Elite Prospects, 2026)

- **Functional:** games at European times
- **Emotional:** home country heroes
- **Self-expressive:** following the world's best league

↗ Focus

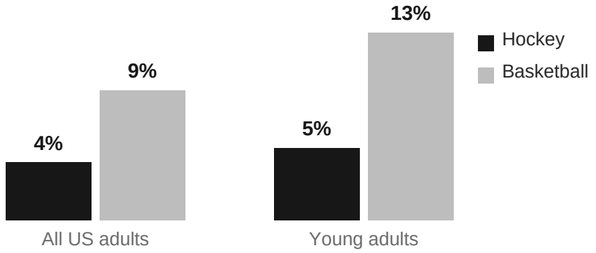
2026

## Are sales going up or down?



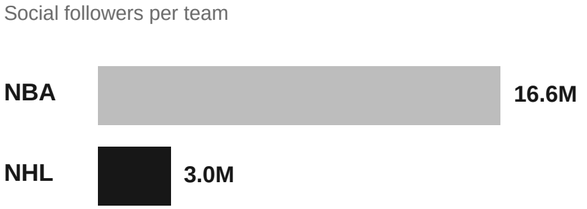

Up. Revenue grew 56% and attendance set records, so sales are not dropping. But every league grew and the NHL stays #4 of the five major North American sports leagues, so the real problem is its share of fans.

## Where is the gap largest?




Among young adults, basketball leads hockey by 8 points (13% vs 5%), against 5 points across all US adults. Young fans are where the NHL loses most ground.

## Who is winning that segment?




The NBA. It wins young fans through stars, culture and social reach: 5.5x the followers per team (STN Digital, 2025). Young fans follow players more than teams.

## FOCUS: YOUNG CASUAL US FANS AGED 18 TO 29

- They show the largest share gap.
- They are the fans the NBA is winning over.
- Today's young adults are tomorrow's core fans.
- Macro trend: 65% of 18 to 29 year olds use TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2026), and hockey's speed and drama work well in short clips.



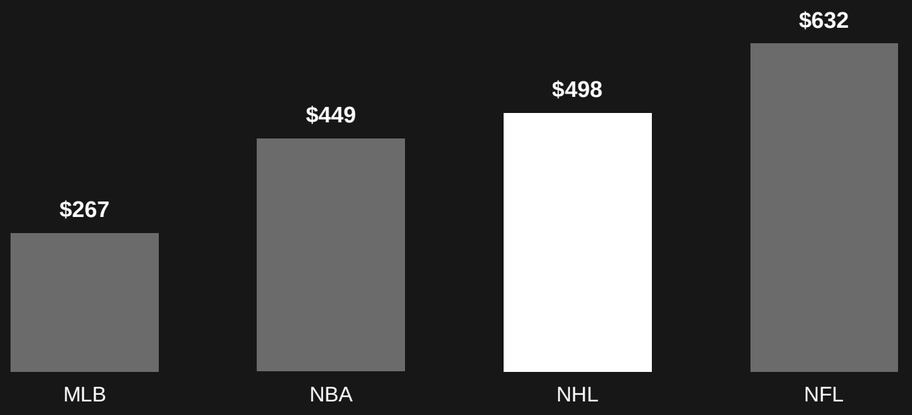
↗ Pyramid

2026

# PRICE AND AVAILABILITY

**A night at the NHL costs more than the NBA**

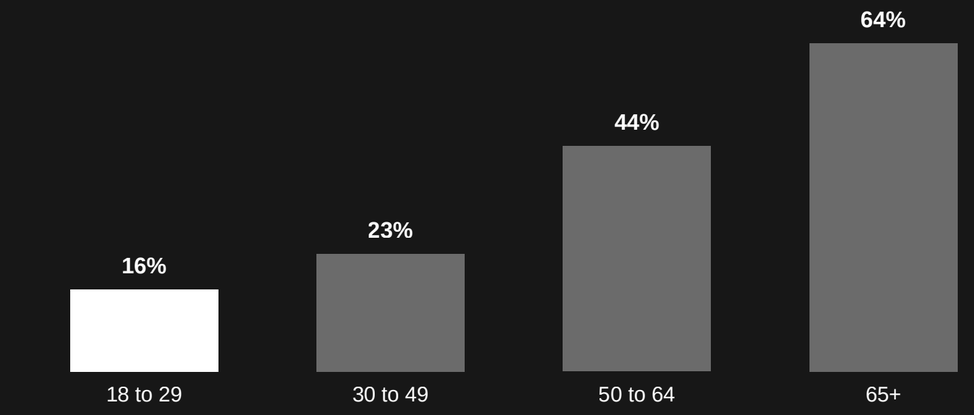
Fan Cost Index, 2024: tickets, parking, food and merch for a family of four, US$




Source: Hard Rock Bet (2025).

**Only 16% of 18 to 29 year olds have cable TV**

US adults who subscribe to cable or satellite TV at home, by age, %




Source: Park & McClain (2025), Pew Research Center.

- **Price:** a family night costs $498, more than the NBA ($449) and almost double MLB ($267). Minor league seats start at $10 (Rochester Americans, 2025).

- **Availability:** arenas are 97.5% full (Rial, 2026), but big games sit behind paywalls. The Stanley Cup Final drew 5.2M on free ABC (ESPN Press Room, 2026b) but 2.5M on paid TNT (Associated Press, 2025). With only 16% of young adults on cable, most of them miss these games.

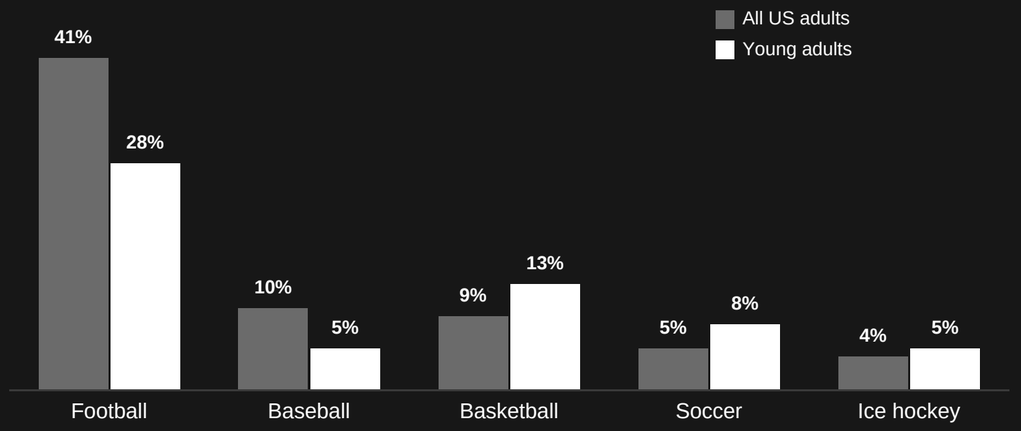
↗ Pyramid

2026

# AWARENESS & QUALITY

### Young adults pick basketball over hockey, 13% to 5%

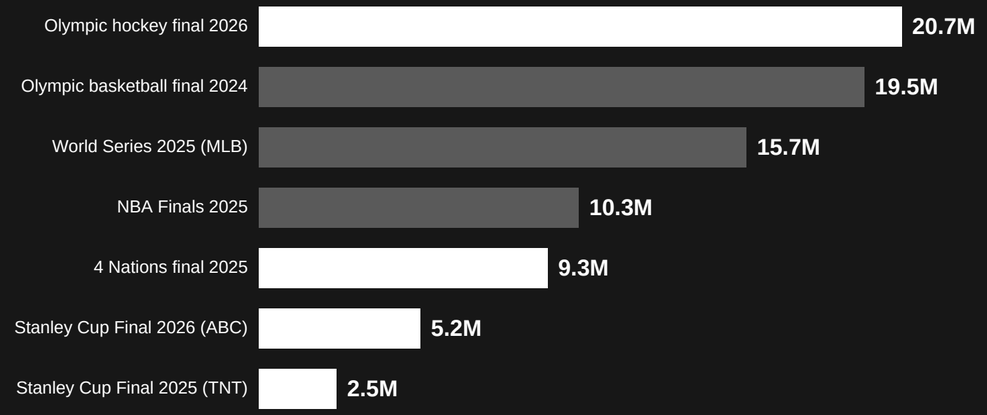
Favourite sport to watch, US adults vs 18 to 29 year olds, % (latest Gallup edition with this age group)




Source: Jones (2024), Gallup, n = 1,013, fieldwork December 2023.

### International hockey rivals the biggest US events

US TV viewers, millions (game average). White = hockey, grey = other sports




Sources: Axios (2026), Weinstein (2024), FOX Sports (2025), ESPN Press Room (2025), 4 Nations: Associated Press (2025).

- **Awareness:** every hockey fan knows the NHL, but young US fans rarely choose it: only 5% of young adults call hockey their favourite sport vs 13% for basketball, and NBA teams have 5.5x the social followers (16.6M vs 3.0M).

- **Quality:** elite, the strongest level. The 2026 Olympic final drew 20.7M viewers, close to the 2026 NBA Finals at 20.6M (ESPN Press Room, 2026a). The problem is that young fans rarely see it.

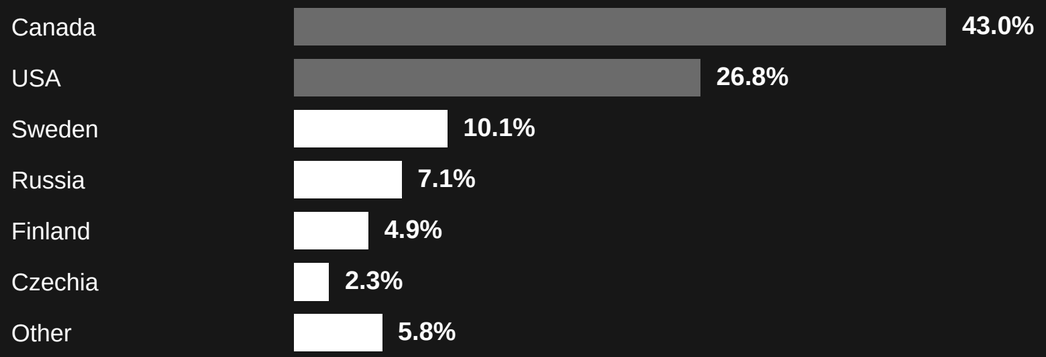
↗ Pyramid

2026

# LEADERSHIP & TRUST

### #1 in hockey: the world's best play here

NHL players by nationality, 2026/27 season (share of all players)




Source: Elite Prospects (2026). Other = Switzerland 1.2%, Latvia 0.9%, Slovakia 0.9%, rest 2.8%.

### Trust: integrity issues since 2021

Events that put the league's conduct in the news

**2021 Blackhawks**
Report finds the club mishandled a 2010 sexual assault allegation. Fined $2M

**2025 Hockey Canada case**
Five players acquitted (July), but the NHL barred them from playing until Dec 1

**Ongoing Player safety**
Head hits, fighting and concussions remain a public debate

Sources: NHL (2021, 2025b).

- **Leadership:** #1 in hockey (30% of players from outside North America), but young fans compare leagues, not hockey: there the NHL is #4 of five by revenue ($7.94B vs $22.0B for the NFL) and behind the NBA in stars and culture.

- **Trust:** mixed. A $2M Blackhawks fine (2021), five players held out in the Hockey Canada case (2025) and the debate over head hits have not emptied arenas (97.5% full). New scandals could still put off young fans who are just starting to watch.

↗ DRUM

2026

# DRUM

**TARGET CUSTOMER SEGMENT**

Young casual US fans, aged 18 to 29

## Relevant

Weak: young fans want stars, clips and culture, but the NHL sells tradition and team logos. Only 5% of young adults favour hockey vs 13% basketball.

## Different

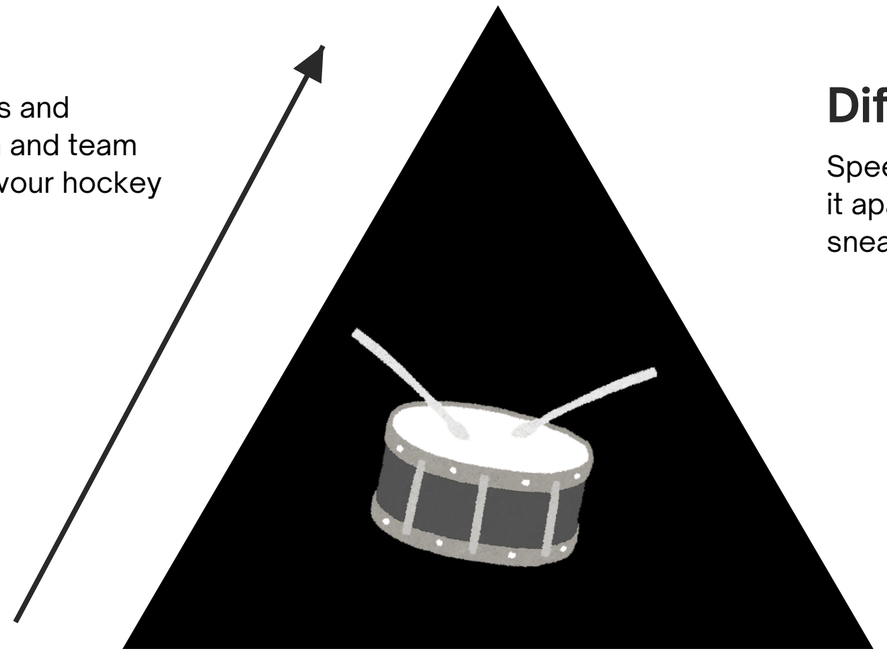
Speed, physical play and the Stanley Cup set it apart from the NBA's culture of stars and sneakers.

## Motivating

Hard to try: many big games are on paid TV. The Stanley Cup Final drew 5.2M on free TV (ABC) but only 2.5M on paid cable (TNT), and a family night costs $498. Yet 20.7M watched the Olympic final, so demand exists.

## Unique

Hard to copy: the Stanley Cup (since 1893), outdoor games and Olympic hockey. This only helps if young fans see it.



**Your brand: NHL**

**Competitive brands: NBA (main rival), NFL, MLB**

**DIFFERENTIATION & UNIQUENESS**

**Positioning: for young US sports fans who want fast, physical drama, the NHL is the most intense sport to watch and share, because it has the Stanley Cup, the best international tournaments and the world's best players.**

↗ Pyramid

2026

# THE PYRAMID

REPURCHASE

TRIAL

**LOYALTY & BONDING:** Strong for core fans (arenas 97.5% full, record attendance), but weak for young fans: most have no team yet, so there is little bond to drive repurchase.

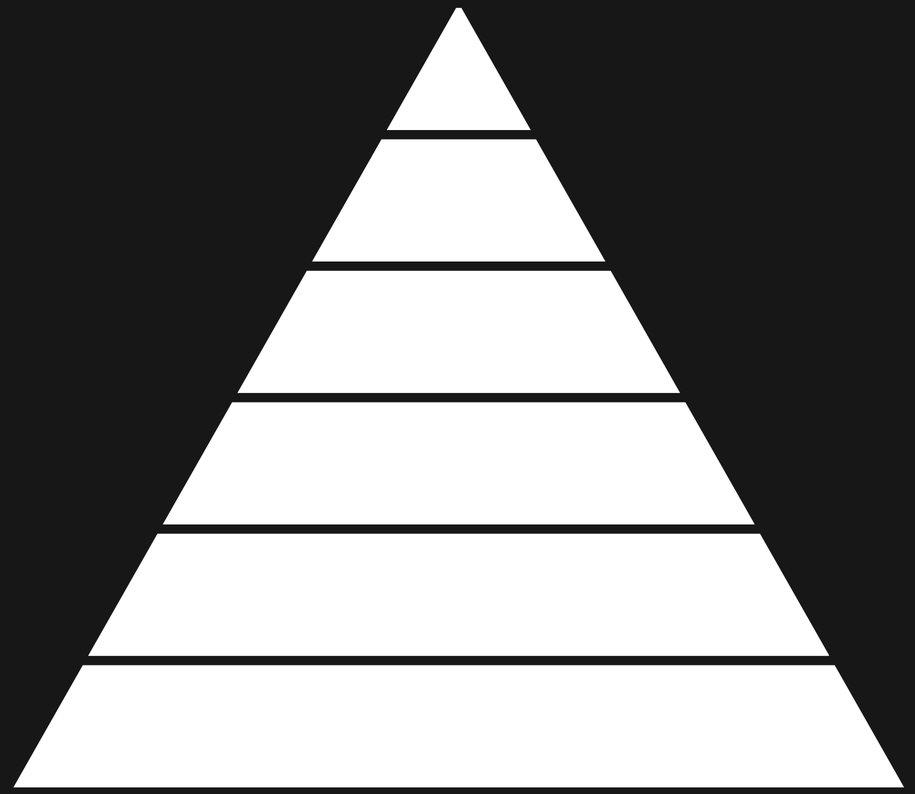
**DRUM ASSOCIATIONS:** Different and unique (Stanley Cup, speed, Olympic hockey), but not relevant or motivating for young fans, who prefer leagues built around stars (13% of young adults favour basketball vs 5% hockey).

**TRUST & CONFIDENCE:** The record is mixed. The Blackhawks (2021) and Hockey Canada (2025) cases and the debate on player safety have not cut attendance. New scandals could still put off young fans before they become regulars.

**LEADERSHIP REPUTATION:** #1 in hockey (30% of players from outside North America), but young fans compare leagues, not hockey: the NHL is #4 of five by revenue ($7.94B vs $22.0B for the NFL) and behind the NBA in stars and culture.

**PERCEIVED QUALITY:** Elite: the world's best players and fast, dramatic games. 20.7M Americans watched the 2026 Olympic final.

**AWARENESS & VISUAL IDENTITY:** The weakest level. Only 5% of young adults call hockey their favourite sport (13% basketball), only 16% have cable to see the big games, and NBA teams have 5.5x the social followers.



***Trial:*** *driven by Awareness. Young fans can't try a league they never see (5% vs 13%).*
***Repurchase:*** *driven by relevant DRUM associations feeding Loyalty. Without a bond, fans do not come back.*

# COMPETITOR MATRIX

+ NHL stronger = equal − NHL weaker

| |  |  |  |  Minor & junior hockey |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Awareness** | − fav. sport: 9% vs 4% | − fav. sport: 41% vs 4% | − fav. sport: 10% vs 4% | + **best known hockey league** |
| **Quality** | = both elite | = both elite | = both elite | + **world's best players** |
| **Leadership** | − $12.50B vs $7.94B | − $22.0B vs $7.94B | − $12.53B vs $7.94B | + **every player's end goal** |
| **Trust** | = integrity issues in both | = safety debate in both | = no clear gap | = CHL abuse lawsuits |
| **DRUM** | − unique too, more relevant | − unique too, more motivating | = unique too, also fading | + **less unique, less relevant** |
| **Loyalty** | = 98% vs 97.5% seats filled | = 97.6% vs 97.5% seats filled | + **73% vs 97.5% seats filled** | + **~60% vs 97.5% seats filled** |
| **Price & access** | − $449 vs $498<br>Finals free on ABC yearly | = $632 vs $498<br>87%+ of games free on TV | − $267 vs $498<br>World Series free on FOX | − AHL tickets from $10 |

Sources: seats filled from NBA (2024a), Lloyd (2026), MLB (2025) and American Hockey League (2024) with own capacity calc., Westhead (2023), NBA (2024b), NewscastStudio (2026).

# DIAGNOSIS

## Pyramid vs competitors

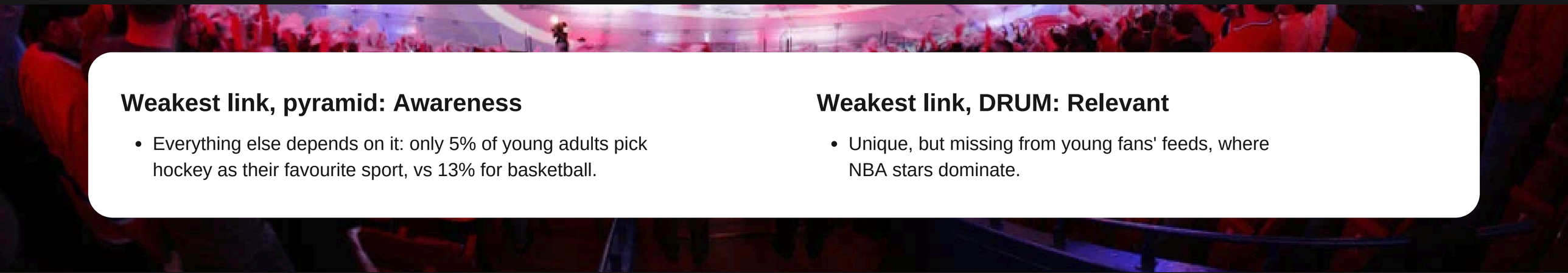
+ Quality: world's best players. The 2026 Olympic final (20.7M) matched the NBA Finals (20.6M)
+ Loyalty: 97.5% of seats filled, level with NBA and NFL, ahead of MLB (73%)

- Awareness: 5% of young adults pick hockey vs 13% basketball
- Leadership: $7.94B revenue, #4 of five leagues (NFL $22.0B)
- Access: $498 family night vs $449 NBA, and big games on cable

## DRUM vs competitors

+ Different & Unique: Stanley Cup, speed and Olympic hockey match the big leagues and beat minor hockey

- Relevant: young fans follow NBA stars. Lakers posts get 45.5K engagements vs 6.5K for the Maple Leafs (STN Digital, 2025)
- Motivating: no weekly ritual like the NFL's. Stanley Cup Final 5.2M vs NBA Finals 20.6M (2026)



### Weakest link, pyramid: Awareness

- Everything else depends on it: only 5% of young adults pick hockey as their favourite sport, vs 13% for basketball.

### Weakest link, DRUM: Relevant

- Unique, but missing from young fans' feeds, where NBA stars dominate.

↗ Game Plan

2026

# GAME PLAN

## The NHL's Drive to Survive

Why: young fans lack a reason to care. Drive to Survive (Netflix, since 2019) shows F1 behind the scenes, and the share of F1 fans under 35 rose to 43% (Formula 1 & Motorsport Network, 2025). The NHL's version, FACEOFF, by the same producers, sits behind Prime Video's paywall (NHL, 2025a). Make one episode per team easily accessible. Drama draws in casual viewers through the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

→

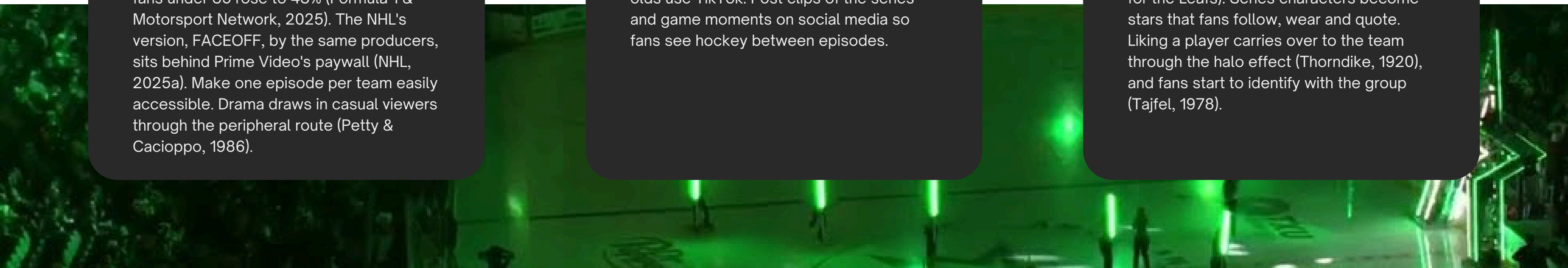
## Clip the drama

Why: Awareness is the weakest pyramid level (5% of young adults pick hockey vs 13% basketball) and 65% of 18 to 29 year olds use TikTok. Post clips of the series and game moments on social media so fans see hockey between episodes.

→

## STARS & CULTURE

Why: Relevant is the weakest DRUM element, and young fans follow NBA stars (Lakers posts 45.5K engagements vs 6.5K for the Leafs). Series characters become stars that fans follow, wear and quote. Liking a player carries over to the team through the halo effect (Thorndike, 1920), and fans start to identify with the group (Tajfel, 1978).



↗ Reflection

2026

# REFLECTION

## What I learned

Great insights into the NHL and ice hockey as a business, not just a sport. The pyramid is a great method for evaluating a brand from one segment's point of view: the NHL is strong at the top (loyal fans, full arenas) but weak at the base for young casual fans.

## What was easy

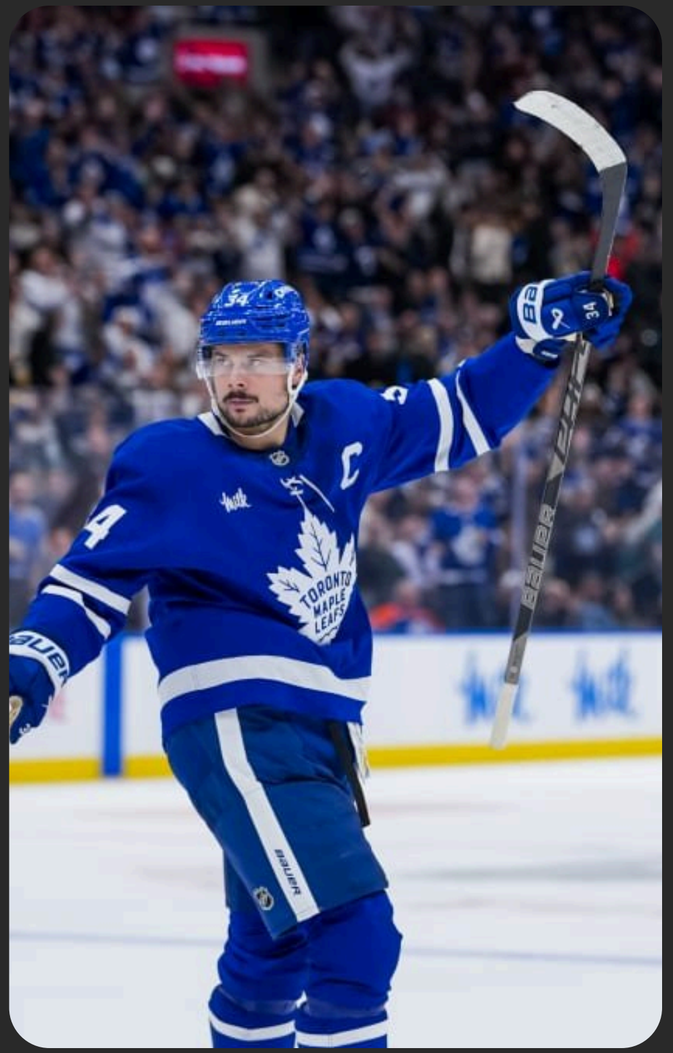
Coming up with the solution: my earlier Consumer Psychology case on F1's Drive to Survive happened to match the NHL's two problems almost exactly: low awareness among young fans and an ageing fan base. NHL, like other North American sports leagues, is huge, so there was a lot of data and research available for this task.

## What was hard

Formatting the slide structure so each step builds on the last. Connecting the pyramid and DRUM findings into one diagnosis by comparing the NHL with its competitors level by level.

## LLM use

Claude Opus 5.5 (Anthropic), used for:
- Research: finding sources and fact checking figures
- Citations: building and coordinating the APA citations
- Proofreading and tightening the slide text



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