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Jacobson: Sports should leave politics at the door. | Opinion

Sheldon H. Jacobson

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Politics always ranks high on the list of controversial topics.

With the midterm elections just weeks away, the economy, gun policy and violent crime are the top three issues of concern to voters. In Canada, a National Post poll ahead of her 2021 federal election put the cost of living, health care costs and the post-pandemic economic recovery as the top three

issues. These lists reflect the differences and similarities between the two countries.

Sports is a field which has some exemption from politics. A MAGA Republican and an AOC Democrat may veer to the same team while agreeing on something else.

Not so in Canada.

Having lived in Montreal for the first 23 years of my life, hockey is part of my DNA. Therefore, it was a welcome statement when Quebec politicians lauded the election of London, Ontario-born Anglophone, Nick Suzuki, as the new captain of the Montreal Canadiens. His greetings soon faded when he strongly suggested that he learn French in order to reach the province's francophone base.

With French a natural choice for those living in Quebec, choosing a second language is certainly in everyone's interest. However, for Quebec politicians to follow up their congratulatory note with a qualification that reiterates the politics of language that I thought had been left behind decades ago, was disappointing.

I studied French for nine years, learning to speak the language well enough to receive and order food at cafes in France while traveling abroad. A few years ago, when visiting Quebec City on a business trip, the natives who worked at my hotel were impressed by how well an American could speak French. I didn't have the heart to tell them that I grew up in the province.

Mastering a new language becomes more difficult with each passing year. Doing so when playing a professional sport makes the task even more difficult.

There are many issues of concern in the United States. The language doesn't rank very high on that list, as it still appears in Canada.

In a zero-sum game, what's more important for French-speaking fans: having a team they can connect with through a common language, or a team that wins the Stanley Cup? If one must be sacrificed, loyal fans will opt for championships instead of communication.

Canada has been a Stanley Cup desert for nearly 30 years; It was last raised in Montreal in 1993. Since that time, the four US-based Original Six teams (Detroit, Chicago, Boston, New York) have won nine Stanley Cups, with the Red Wings topping the list with four. Montreal and Toronto, the other two Canada-based original six teams, have both laid eggs.

Sports should be a place where politics is left at the door. If not, more non-Canadian-born hockey players may place Canadian teams on their no-trade list, making future championship teams more difficult to assemble.

In the sphere of decision-making, any time additional constraints are added, however benign they may be, distractions arise that can subvert the objective. These are the unintended consequences of prioritizing priorities over requirements.

Successful professional sports teams apply meritocratic principles when assembling rosters. Without it, performance on the field or on the ice is affected. Ditching meritocratic principles in the team dressing room increases the risk of underperforming in competition.

Everyone wants championship teams that speak the universal language of success. The interference of well-intentioned but misguided politicians can only hinder such efforts.

Sheldon Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois.