

# Sports Spectatorship in the Nordic Countries

## The Exceptional Role of Ice Hockey in Finland

**Arto Kuuluvainen** 

Turku University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Author contact <arto.kuuluvainen@turkuamk.fi>

### Abstract

This article examines how sports spectatorship contributes to national identity in the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on the culturally exceptional position of ice hockey in Finland. Using two survey datasets—a comparative Nordic survey from 2022 (N=4000) and Finnish brand-perception data from 2018 (N=850)—the study analyses national pride and satisfaction related to international sporting success, as well as patterns of sports following through media and live attendance. Finland reports the highest levels of sports-related national pride, and satisfaction with national sports results is high and comparable to Denmark. Domestic following patterns reveal clear cross-national differences: ice hockey is the most followed sport in Finland, whereas football dominates in Sweden and Norway, and Denmark stands out with handball as the strongest domestic spectator sport alongside football. Finland's internal patterns further indicate gendered spectator publics, with men reporting higher sports-related national pride and substantially higher following of ice hockey and football than women. Internationally, Finnish audiences diverge from a football-centred consumption pattern, showing comparatively stronger engagement with the NHL and motorsports (Formula 1), alongside continued interest in skiing and athletics. Finally, brand-perception results show that the Finnish men's national ice hockey team (Leijonat) functions as a powerful national brand associated with popularity, perceived quality, and emotional resonance, reinforcing its role as a cultural institution through which national belonging is reproduced and emotionally experienced.

*Keywords:* nationalism, banal nationalism, symbolic capital, invented traditions, sport media, national teams, Leijonat, MM95, gendered publics

# 1. Introduction

Sport plays a central role in the construction of national identity, particularly in smaller nations where international sporting success can function as a powerful source of collective pride and social cohesion (Bairner, 2001; Halldórsson, 2020). In the Nordic countries, sport is not merely a form of entertainment but an important cultural institution that shapes public discourse, collective memory, and everyday social practices. Through recurring rituals, symbolic victories, and shared emotional experiences, sport contributes to the ongoing construction of national belonging and identification, resonating with broader theoretical discussions on imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) and invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1983).

While the cultural significance of sport is shared across the Nordic region, its specific forms and meanings vary considerably between countries. Football is widely regarded as the most followed and culturally visible sport in Norway and Denmark, particularly in terms of participation, media coverage, and public engagement (Jensen, 2025). At the same time, other sports hold strong symbolic positions within national cultures (such as skiing in Norway and handball in Denmark). In Sweden, ice hockey enjoys substantial popularity and historical resonance, yet football continues to occupy a more prominent position in terms of mass following and national representation (Stark & Andersson, 2025).

Comparative research has shown that the cultural meanings attached to sport vary considerably across Nordic countries. In Sweden, football has historically played a central role in popular culture and nation-building (Andersson, 2002), while ice hockey has also functioned as an important symbolic arena in post-war Swedish society (Stark, 2010). In Norway, national identity has traditionally been articulated through skiing and winter sports, reflecting broader historical and geographical conditions (Goksøyr, 2013; Jensen, 2025). These national variations underline that sporting cultures are not universal but are shaped by distinct historical trajectories and social contexts.

Against this broader Nordic backdrop, Finland represents a notable exception (Isotalo et al., 2025): here, ice hockey functions as the primary cultural arena through which national pride and collective identification are most visibly articulated and sustained. In this respect, Finland shares certain features with other 'hockey nations' where international ice hockey becomes a prominent vehicle for national narration, even if the institu-

tional and media ecologies differ markedly from the Nordic case (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).

The centrality of ice hockey in Finland is closely connected to the success of the men's national team, *Leijonat* ("The Lions"), whose international achievements have become powerful symbolic resources in Finnish public life. A particularly formative moment was the 1995 Ice Hockey World Championship victory, which coincided with a period of economic recovery and broader societal transformation including Finland's EU accession in 1995. This event, known as *MM95*, has since acquired a near-mythical status in Finnish collective memory, frequently evoked through recurring symbols, narratives, and practices—most notably the ritualised expression "*Torille!*" ("To the Market Square!"). Such symbolic repetitions illustrate how sporting success can become embedded in everyday expressions of national belonging (Häkli, 2005).

The continuing cultural resonance of *MM95* is also visible in contemporary feature journalism. For example, *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's most-read printed newspaper (*Kansallinen Mediatutkimus [KMT]*, 2025), has recently revisited *MM95* both in anniversary retrospectives framing the 1995 celebrations as a shared national turning point and in broader memory-focused features where *MM95* functions as a readily recognisable reference point beyond sport (Malkavaara, 2025; Elo, 2025). Read together, these examples illustrate how *MM95* operates both as an explicitly commemorated event and as a banal mnemonic marker in Finnish public discourse (Hobsbawm, 1983; Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002).

This article examines how sports spectatorship contributes to the construction of national identity in the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on Finland. Drawing on comparative survey data, the study analyses patterns of national pride, emotional attachment, and modes of sports following, with special attention to the symbolic role of ice hockey. By situating the Finnish case within a broader Nordic context, the article contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on nationalism, symbolic power, and the everyday reproduction of collective identities (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002). In doing so, it highlights how sport functions not only as entertainment but also as a key arena through which national meanings are negotiated and reaffirmed.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This article draws on established theories of nationalism and symbolic power to examine how sports spectatorship contributes to national identity formation in the Nordic context, with a specific focus on Finland. The core conceptual tools are drawn from the works of Anderson (1983), Hobsbawm (1983), Bourdieu (1984), Billig (1995), and Edensor (2002).

Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of "imagined communities" provides a foundational lens through which to understand how national identity is constructed through shared symbols, rituals, and narratives. In this view, the nation is not a natural entity, but a socially imagined one, sustained through recurring cultural practices such as following national sports teams. In Finland, the men's national ice hockey team, *Leijonat*, functions as one such powerful symbolic anchor.

Eric Hobsbawm (1983) introduced the concept of "invented traditions" to explain how modern nations use selective historical events and symbols to foster cohesion and continuity. The ritualised repetition of the 1995 ice hockey championship victory (MM95) and slogans like "Torille!" exemplify such invented traditions that reinforce national sentiment in Finland.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of symbolic capital and symbolic power helps explain how certain sports come to occupy dominant cultural positions. In the Finnish context, ice hockey has accumulated significant symbolic capital through media representation, international success, and state-supported infrastructure. This symbolic value is not equally distributed across the Nordic region, highlighting the relational and contingent nature of national sports cultures. From this perspective, symbolic capital refers to the socially recognised value attached to cultural practices and institutions, which grants them legitimacy and authority (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of sport, symbolic capital is unevenly distributed; certain sports acquire elevated cultural status through historical success, media visibility, and emotional resonance, while others remain marginal. This uneven distribution is central to understanding why ice hockey occupies a uniquely dominant position in Finland compared to other Nordic countries.

National identity is also fundamentally relational, shaped through symbolic distinctions between "us" and culturally meaningful others (Brubaker, 1996; Smith, 1991). Rather than being internally fixed or homogeneous, national identities are constructed through comparison, rivalry, and differentiation. In the Nordic context, such relational dynamics become par-

ticularly visible in sport, where encounters between national teams serve as arenas for negotiating belonging and difference. Finnish national identity, for example, is often articulated in relation to neighbouring countries (most notably Sweden and Russia) whose historical, political, and cultural significance heightens the emotional intensity of sporting encounters. Ice hockey matches against these opponents thus function as moments of symbolic boundary-making, where national narratives are reaffirmed through competition, emotion, and collective experience.

To complement these structural theories, we also draw on Michael Billig's (1995) concept of "banal nationalism" and Tim Edensor's (2002) work on national identity and everyday life. These perspectives emphasise how national belonging is reproduced through routine expressions, media rituals, and embodied emotions. Chants, flags, televised celebrations, and emotional outpourings around hockey games serve as examples of such everyday nationalism.

Together, these theoretical perspectives enable an analysis of how sports spectatorship, especially around ice hockey, functions as a cultural practice through which national identity is reproduced, challenged, and emotionally experienced.

### 3. Data and methods

This study draws on two distinct survey datasets that together enable both cross-national comparisons and an in-depth look at Finland's unique case. The primary focus is on exploring emotional attachment to international sports success and the relative symbolic importance of ice hockey in Finland compared to its Nordic neighbours.

#### 3.1 *Comparative Nordic Survey on Sports Spectatorship*

The first dataset derives from a comparative survey conducted in 2022 across four Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). The survey was administered through Bilendi's Nordic M3 Research panel, using quota sampling (age, gender, and region) to approximate demographic representativeness. The total sample size was  $N=4,000$  ( $\approx 1,000$  respondents per country).

The questionnaire included two items capturing evaluative and affective orientations toward international sport: national pride ("*How much*

*national pride do you feel from the success of your country's athletes or teams in international sports?";* response options: Very much / Quite much / Only a little / None) and satisfaction with recent success ("*How satisfied are you, in general, with the success of your country's athletes or teams in sports events in 2022?*"; response options: Very satisfied / Somewhat satisfied / Moderately satisfied / Not satisfied at all). In addition, respondents reported which sports and leagues they followed regularly through media consumption or live attendance.

These indicators provide the basis for assessing the emotional and cultural weight of international sport within each national context. Results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 (see Results). In this study, domestic leagues refers to following sport within the national league system (rather than a specific division).

Methodological note: As a commercial panel survey, the sample is not fully randomised. Although quotas support baseline comparability, self-selection bias and limited replicability should be acknowledged. Moreover, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and temporal depth.

### *3.2 Finnish Brand Perception Survey (SponsorOptimizer)*

The second dataset is based on the SponsorOptimizer survey, conducted in Finland in 2018 (N=850), focusing on perceptions of various sports and commercial brands. Respondents were also recruited from Bilendi's M3 Research panel, again using quota sampling to reflect the demographic composition of the Finnish population aged 15–65.

This survey included detailed questions regarding:

- Brand awareness and emotional connection to Finnish national teams
- Perceived credibility, appeal, and prestige of the men's national ice hockey team (Leijonat) and football team (Huuhkajat)

In the SponsorOptimizer survey, respondents were only asked to evaluate the brand attributes of national teams they recognized at least to some extent (i.e., awareness score of 3 or higher on a 5-point scale). This ensured that brand perceptions were based on some prior knowledge rather than uninformed judgments. These brand perception measures allow for a comparative analysis of how national teams function as symbolic assets in the Finnish context.

### 3.3 Analytical Strategy

The Nordic comparative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests ( $\chi^2$ ) in SPSS to assess country differences; Cramér's V was used to estimate effect sizes where relevant. All results are reported as weighted percentages reflecting each country's population structure.

To contextualise Finnish sports culture more broadly, supplementary data from Statistics Finland's 2017 Leisure Survey (Tilastokeskus, 2019) were also consulted. These provide historical depth and validation for observed trends in live sports attendance and media consumption.

While the analysis is quantitative in method, it is guided by a socio-cultural interpretive framework. Concepts such as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), and banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) inform the interpretation of how sports spectatorship reflects and reproduces national sentiment.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 National Pride and Satisfaction with Sporting Success

The first comparative analysis focuses on emotional responses to international sporting success across the four Nordic countries. Based on data, Finland reports the highest level of national pride from international sports success (65.7% reporting "very" or "quite much"), followed by Sweden (59.8%) and Norway (57.7%), with Denmark lowest (52.8%). For satisfaction with national sports success in 2022, levels are high in both Finland (79.8%) and Denmark (80.4%), while Norway (70.4%) and Sweden (68.2%) report lower satisfaction.

**Table 1.** National pride and satisfaction with sports success by country (% reporting high pride; % reporting satisfied; N=4000; 1000 respondents per country)

| Country | Pride from international sports success (Very/Quite) | Satisfied with 2022 sports success (Very/Somewhat) |
|---------|--|--|
| Finland | 65.7%  | 79.8%  |
| Sweden  | 59.8%  | 68.2%  |
| Norway  | 57.7%  | 70.4%  |
| Denmark | 52.8%  | 80.4%  |

Statistical tests (Chi-square,  $p < .001$ ) confirmed that these country-level differences in pride and satisfaction are statistically significant ( $\chi^2(3)=123.17$  and  $94.81$ , respectively). Cramér's  $V$  indicated moderate effect sizes (.18 and .15). The elevated pride levels in Finland, and the high satisfaction levels in both Finland and Denmark, likely reflect not only recent success (e.g., Finland's Olympic ice hockey gold 2022) but also the deeper symbolic integration of sport, particularly ice hockey, into Finnish national identity.

These findings support the interpretation that Finnish respondents are more emotionally invested in national sporting outcomes. This aligns with theories of everyday nationalism (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002), in which shared rituals and public symbols (such as celebrating hockey victories) reinforce national belonging.

#### 4.2 Sport Preferences and Media Engagement

To better understand which sports underpin national sentiment and identity in the Nordic countries, we examined patterns of media following and live attendance. Respondents were asked whether they follow each sport “only in media” or also “at least occasionally at a stadium or arena”. In the following table, we combine these two groups to measure the total proportion of respondents who follow each sport in any capacity.

As shown in Table 2, ice hockey emerges as the most followed sport in Finland, where 54.9% of respondents report following it either in the media or in person. In contrast, football holds the dominant position in Sweden (48.3%) and Norway (45.5%), whereas Denmark stands out with handball (47.0%) slightly surpassing football (42.8%).

**Table 2.** Domestic sports following by country (% of respondents following sport either in media or live;  $N=1000$  per country; multiple responses allowed)

| Sport                             | Denmark | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| Ice hockey (domestic leagues)     | 19.6%   | 54.9%   | 19.2%  | 45.4%  |
| Football (domestic leagues)       | 42.8%   | 36.8%   | 45.5%  | 48.3%  |
| Handball (domestic leagues)       | 47.0%   | 11.6%   | 32.4%  | 31.5%  |
| Cross-country skiing <sup>1</sup> | —       | 53.0%   | 62.9%  | 51.9%  |

<sup>1</sup> Cross-country skiing was not asked in Denmark and is thus excluded for that country.

These figures confirm the exceptional centrality of ice hockey in Finland, both in absolute terms and relative to other Nordic countries. While foot-

ball dominates spectator culture in Sweden and Norway, Denmark stands out with handball as the strongest domestic spectator sport alongside football's continued prominence. Moreover, Finland has a distinct configuration in which ice hockey clearly surpasses football, demonstrating a distinct sporting culture rooted in different symbolic anchors.

In Finland, sports-related national pride is gendered: men report “very/quite much” pride more often than women (71.4% vs 60.3%). This aligns with gendered domestic sports-following publics. For the domestic ice hockey league, 66.0% of men follow the sport at least via media or occasional attendance compared with 44.2% of women (attendance: 21.6% vs 11.8%). Football following is even more strongly gendered (50.1% of men vs 23.7% of women; attendance: 13.8% vs 3.4%). Domestic athletics (track and field) is also widely followed in Finland, though with a smaller gender gap than football (60.3% vs 42.4%). Cross-country skiing is comparatively more even across genders (57.9% vs 48.1%), reinforcing that Finland's “hockey exceptionalism” is shaped by both symbolic centrality and the social composition of spectator publics.

Also notable is Finland's low engagement with handball, which is far more prominent in Denmark (47.0%) and still relatively followed in Norway and Sweden. In contrast, cross-country skiing remains highly followed in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, especially in Norway (62.9%), reflecting the historical and geographical ties of skiing to Nordic sporting identities.

Because Table 2 captures domestic leagues following (media and/or occasional attendance), it does not directly measure national-team ‘event’ audiences (e.g., sold-out qualifiers) or short-lived tournament peaks.

Together, these results illustrate that national sports cultures are not uniform across the region. Rather, they reflect historically developed patterns of media visibility, athletic success, and emotional investment, with Finland maintaining a distinct configuration centred on ice hockey, while its neighbours remain more aligned with football or other regionally dominant sports like handball or skiing.

### *4.3 International Sports Following*

Beyond domestic competitions, patterns of international sports consumption reveal further national differences in spectatorship and cultural preferences across the Nordic region.

Formula 1 emerges as particularly prominent in Finland, with 26.1% of Finnish respondents reporting that they follow the sport. This is the high-

est proportion among the Nordic countries, surpassing Denmark (17.5%), Sweden (12.7%), and Norway (12.4%). This elevated interest reflects Finland's long-standing association with elite motorsport, including its celebrated Formula 1 drivers such as Kimi Räikkönen and Mika Häkkinen, who have functioned as symbolic figures in Finnish sporting narratives.

Similarly, international ice hockey, specifically the NHL, holds a stronger cultural position in Finland than elsewhere. Nearly a quarter of Finns (24.7%) report following NHL games, compared to 13.9% in Sweden, 5.4% in Norway, and just 4.4% in Denmark. This sustained attention to North American ice hockey aligns with the sport's broader symbolic integration into Finnish national identity, and the high number of Finnish players in the NHL further strengthens this connection.

In contrast, international football competitions attract larger audiences in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden than in Finland. For example:

- UEFA Champions League: Norway (30.9%), Denmark (28.6%), Sweden (25.1%), Finland (18.4%)
- English Premier League: Norway (32.8%), Denmark (29.4%), Sweden (24.7%), Finland (19.8%)

These figures highlight football's wider transnational appeal and institutional presence in the other Nordic countries, reinforcing its status as the dominant cultural sport outside Finland.

Other sports show more country-specific variations. For instance:

- Cross-country skiing is followed by 34.3% of Finns and 41.4% of Norwegians, compared to 33.3% in Sweden.
- Cycling (e.g., Tour de France, Giro d'Italia) shows higher popularity in Denmark (25.3%) and Norway (12.7%) than in Finland (5.4%) or Sweden (4.7%).
- Athletics, historically important in Finnish sport, is currently followed by 34.5% of Finns—also the highest in the region.

These patterns support the broader argument that Finnish sports culture is defined by a distinct constellation of symbolic associations. Rather than conforming to a pan-European football-centric model, Finland displays a diversified sporting profile rooted in motorsport, ice hockey, skiing, and traditional athletics—sports that have produced internationally recognized figures and emotionally resonant national narratives.

#### 4.4 Brand Perceptions of National Teams in Finland

The symbolic prominence of Leijonat in Finnish cultural life is further reflected in brand perception data from the 2018 SponsorOptimizer survey. This dataset measured public associations with both the Finnish men's national ice hockey team (Leijonat) and the men's national football team (Huuhkajat), focusing on brand-related attributes such as emotional engagement, trust, and perceived quality.

Importantly, respondents were asked to evaluate only those teams with which they had at least a minimal level of familiarity. Thus, the results are based on subsamples filtered for brand awareness (awareness score  $\geq 3$  on a five-point scale, Leijonat  $N=569$ , Huuhkajat  $N=324$ ). Within this context, Leijonat consistently outperformed Huuhkajat across nearly all brand dimensions.

As shown in Table 3, the largest gaps emerged in perceptions of being “determined” (Leijonat 38.7%, Huuhkajat 17.6%), “entertaining” (40.6% vs. 20.1%), and “ambitious” (35.9% vs. 15.6%). Differences in perceived quality, efficiency, and inspiration also strongly favored Leijonat. Even in negative attributes, the two teams diverged: nearly one-fifth of respondents described Huuhkajat as “boring” (19.3%), while only 7.1% said the same about Leijonat.

**Table 3.** Brand perceptions of Finnish national teams (Leijonat vs. Huuhkajat). Percentage of respondents familiar with each team who associate it with the following attributes

| Brand Attribute         | Leijonat (%), $N=569$ | Huuhkajat (%), $N=324$ | Difference (pp) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Determined              | 38.7%                 | 17.6%                  | +21.1           |
| Dynamic                 | 28.1%                 | 11.5%                  | +16.6           |
| Entertaining            | 40.6%                 | 20.1%                  | +20.5           |
| Trustworthy             | 20.8%                 | 9.3%                   | +11.5           |
| Inspiring               | 17.9%                 | 9.0%                   | +8.9            |
| High quality            | 24.5%                 | 5.6%                   | +18.9           |
| Efficient               | 22.5%                 | 2.9%                   | +19.6           |
| Popular                 | 44.6%                 | 20.7%                  | +23.9           |
| Ambitious               | 35.9%                 | 15.6%                  | +20.3           |
| Boring (negative trait) | 7.1%                  | 19.3%                  | -12.2           |

Beyond statistical significance, these differences reflect deeper symbolic meanings. Over decades, Leijonat has become more than a sports team—it

has evolved into a national brand, embodying values such as resilience, unity, and perseverance under pressure. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital—cultural prestige that translates into authority and emotional legitimacy within a given field. The comparative weakness of *Huuhkajat* in this regard underscores the enduring emotional and cultural hegemony of ice hockey in Finland.

## 5. Discussion

This study has explored how sports spectatorship contributes to national identity in the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on the exceptional role of ice hockey in Finland. The findings confirm that emotional investment in national sports varies significantly across the region, with Finland standing apart in terms of symbolic engagement and pride and reporting high satisfaction levels comparable to Denmark.

In Sweden, football has historically functioned as a central cultural institution, while ice hockey gained prominence later through processes of modernisation and media expansion (Andersson, 2002; Stark, 2010). However, the symbolic hierarchy between the two remains contested. As Stark and Andersson (2025) demonstrate, football still enjoys broader mass participation and institutional legitimacy, whereas ice hockey retains a strong emotional appeal and is closely associated with historical prestige, masculinity, and working-class identity. This dual structure highlights the complex dynamics of sport and identity within Swedish society—dynamics that differ markedly from the clearer cultural dominance of ice hockey in Finland.

In Norway, winter sports have served as powerful national symbols, reflecting both geographical conditions and cultural narratives of endurance and nature (Goksøy, 2013; Jensen, 2025). Against this backdrop, the Finnish case stands out in its strong and enduring identification with ice hockey as a primary marker of national belonging. Recent studies have further demonstrated how this dominance is not only national but also urban in nature. In Helsinki, for example, the rivalry between ice hockey and football has reflected broader tensions between traditional sporting identities and emerging urban cultures (Isotalo et al., 2025). These localised dynamics reinforce the idea that national identity formation through sport is both layered and contested—even within a single country.

At the heart of this distinction lies the symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1984) accumulated by the Finnish men's ice hockey team (Leijonat), which functions not only as a successful sports team but as a national brand and emotional anchor. Compared to Huuhkajat, Leijonat commands considerably higher levels of public trust, emotional resonance, and perceived credibility. These perceptions are not merely reflections of athletic performance but the outcome of long-term cultural construction, media rituals, and repeated international success.

Importantly, Finland's hockey-centred symbolic hierarchy is not replicated across the Nordic region. In Sweden and Norway, football remains the principal spectator sport, whereas Denmark stands out with handball occupying a particularly strong domestic position alongside football. This diversity illustrates how national identities are cultivated through different sporting traditions embedded in distinct historical, geographical, and media contexts.

Such patterns align with relational approaches to nationalism, in which belonging is constructed through comparison and contrast (Anderson, 1983; Edensor, 2002). In Finland, Sweden frequently operates as the primary sporting "Other," especially in ice hockey, where bilateral encounters are routinely invested with heightened symbolic significance. Rivalry with Russia also remains influential, shaped by Cold War legacies and contemporary geopolitical anxieties. In this context, victories over these opponents are readily framed as more than sport (i.e. symbolic affirmations of autonomy, resilience, and solidarity).

These national differences are also visible in transnational media consumption, which further underlines Finland's distinctive sporting repertoire. While football-based competitions such as the UEFA Champions League and the Premier League dominate transnational media interest in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Finland diverges with a stronger emphasis on international ice hockey (NHL) and motorsports (Formula 1). Finland also shows comparatively high engagement with athletics and skiing, reinforcing a broad and multifaceted sporting profile rather than an exclusive orientation toward pan-European football culture.

In Norway, the cultural hierarchy between sports has long placed winter sports, particularly skiing, at the core of national identity. However, recent research suggests that the relationship between ice hockey and football is also marked by regional and class-based differences. According to Jensen (2025), football tends to enjoy broader national media visibility and institutional support, while ice hockey remains more regionally anchored,

particularly in the eastern parts of the country. This dynamic reflects how even within a given national context, sports cultures are unevenly distributed and shaped by socio-geographical factors.

The historical turning point of MM95—Finland’s first men’s hockey world championship—emerges as a key moment in this symbolic narrative. Occurring just after a severe economic recession and on the eve of EU membership, the event provided a powerful story of national recovery and transformation. It marked a symbolic transition from peripheral underdog to confident European nation. Echoes of this moment persist in the recurring slogan “Torille!” (“To the Market Square!”), ritualistically invoked to celebrate later hockey victories and reinforcing the collective memory of MM95 as a foundational moment.

The analysis also reveals gendered and classed dimensions embedded in the symbolic hierarchy of sport. The symbolic capital associated with Leijonat is tightly linked to men’s ice hockey, while women’s hockey (despite considerable international success) receives significantly less cultural recognition and media visibility. This pattern is consistent with gendered spectator publics, as sports such as ice hockey, football, and Formula 1 tend to attract predominantly male audiences and disproportionate media attention relative to women’s sports. This is also visible in Finland’s domestic football following, which shows an even steeper gender gap than hockey in our survey. At the same time, Finland’s strong engagement with athletics and skiing suggests a broader repertoire of sports-following beyond the most male-coded domains. Future research should nevertheless examine more explicitly how gender structures symbolic capital, media visibility, and national identification across Nordic contexts.

Finland’s distinctive spectatorship profile should also be read against a broader national sport heritage that predates the modern “hockey era.” Track and field has long operated as a major symbolic arena in Finland, historically associated with the “Flying Finns” and international prestige (Vettenniemi, 2012), and this legacy remains visible in the comparatively high contemporary following of athletics in this study’s data as well. Finnish baseball (i.e., ‘pesäpallo’ in Finnish) likewise represents a nationally indigenised team sport with explicit nation-building ambitions in the early independence period, and it still attracts a meaningful domestic following alongside globalised sport consumption (Meinander, 2023). Finally, Finland’s strong interest in Formula 1 can be understood not only as entertainment but as part of a longer cultural narrative in which internationally successful drivers have become recognisable figures in Finnish public

memory (Sund, 2005). A similar heritage logic can be seen in Finland's longstanding visibility in Nordic winter disciplines (including ski jumping) and in rally traditions, even as ice hockey has become the most emotionally central national team sport.

In sum, this study highlights that ice hockey in Finland is not merely a sport. It is a cultural institution, a symbolic reservoir, and a key arena for the articulation of national identity. By situating the Finnish case within a broader Nordic framework, the analysis shows that the exceptional status of ice hockey emerges from a constellation of historical, emotional, and relational forces. National belonging, as experienced through sports spectatorship, is not simply a reflection of fandom but a socially constructed and culturally embedded practice of meaning-making.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of sports spectatorship in the construction of national identity across the Nordic countries, with a particular focus on the culturally exceptional position of ice hockey in Finland. Drawing on comparative survey data, the analysis demonstrated that while all Nordic nations engage emotionally with international sport, Finland stands out in the intensity, symbolic weight, and cultural centrality attached to ice hockey.

The Finnish men's national ice hockey team, *Leijonat*, functions as more than a sports team—it represents a powerful national symbol embedded in collective memory, emotional experience, and media ritual. The enduring cultural resonance of *MM95*, and the ritualistic invocation of “*Torille!*” in subsequent hockey triumphs, illustrate how sporting success can become a foundational element in the ongoing narration of national belonging.

By situating Finland within a broader Nordic framework, the article highlights how national sporting cultures are shaped by distinct historical trajectories, media systems, and socio-political contexts. While football dominates the sporting landscape in Norway, and remains highly prominent in Denmark, sharing the symbolic spotlight with ice hockey in Sweden, Finland presents a unique case in which ice hockey serves as the primary medium for articulating national pride and emotional unity.

The study underscores that national identity is neither fixed nor homogeneous but relational, gendered, and classed. Rivalries with neighbouring countries, particularly Sweden and Russia, infuse sporting encounters

with heightened symbolic meaning. At the same time, Finland's internal hierarchy of sports reveals persistent inequalities in symbolic capital, especially along gendered and socio-economic lines.

The comparative survey provides valuable insights into national patterns of spectatorship, yet the analysis is constrained by its cross-sectional design and reliance on commercial panel data. Longitudinal research and qualitative approaches could illuminate how symbolic attachments to sport evolve over time and how they are patterned by gender and socio-economic position. In addition, multivariate modelling (e.g., logistic regression) could assess whether these factors independently predict sports following and national pride.

Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions of nationalism, symbolic power, and the everyday reproduction of collective identities. It shows that sport, far from trivial or apolitical, is a key arena in which national meanings are produced, contested, and emotionally experienced. The Finnish case illustrates how ice hockey can become embedded in the national imagination, operating as a cultural institution through which belonging, memory, and pride are continually negotiated.

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