



## THE FAN CONNECTION

50 Years of the Buffalo Sabres

New Film Showcases the Fans' Perspective

Essay by Gregory Betts

*Cover Image: The Fog Game, game five of the 1975 Stanley Cup Finals between the Sabres and the Flyers at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium. René Robert would score the OT winner, but the Sabres would lose the series*

*Back Cover Image: Brett Hull's controversial "No Goal" from the 1999 Stanley Cup Finals that finished Buffalo's championship hopes in 1999.*

Niagara Artists Centre presents

## **THE FAN CONNECTION**

for virtual film screening



**Friday 5 March- Friday 19 March 2021**

**Tickets are \$9.45 USD through Show&Tell**

### **The Fan Connection**

USA, 2019. Directed by Mary Wall. 93 min. NR

The Rust Belt city of Buffalo, New York yearns to reclaim its lost pride despite a growing sense of futility and cynicism after decades of decline. When a new owner buys their professional hockey team and promises a championship, Buffalonians see a path to their city's relevance.

### **Panel Discussion**

Friday 12 March 7PM EST

### **Panel Guests**

Mary Wall - Producer/Director, The Fan Connection

Eric Wojtanik - Producer, The Fan Connection

Mike Harrington - Sportswriter, Buffalo News

Jamie Salfi - Freelance Sports Pundit

Moderated by Matt Bonomi - Sports Broadcaster

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## 50 Years of the Buffalo Sabres New Film showcases the Fans' Perspective

By Gregory Betts

The North Division has been a revelation in the NHL season this far. Every game matters because every game is against a divisional rival – so every two point gained is two points taken away from a rival. The lack of fans in the stands reminds us of the times we are in. There's no getting around the pandemic. But the North Division has offered a glimpse of our own league. I never knew I had such complex feelings about the Flames. Indeed, most hockey fans I talk to confess to the fact that they have no idea what is happening in the other divisions because the North is so totally absorbing.

Hockey is still happening south of the border, though, and there is at least one city feeling themselves on the other side of a hard border. Buffalo is a hockey town, in part because of the throngs of Canadians that stream over the border for cheaper games with tickets actually available, even on game days.

When the Leafs or the Habs play, and the prices more than triple, it is a spectacle at the border as wave after wave of team flags and jerseys wash across. For these fans, it is Buffalo, Ontario, a hard luck city so familiar in so many ways. The bars accept Canadian currency. Even the team sponsor, Labatt Blue, sticks a maple leaf onto the official apparel. If you squint, you could be in Hamilton or Welland.

The locals, though, don't cheer for the Leafs or the Habs. For fifty years now, this don't-count-us-out-yet city has had what Hamilton, Kitchener,

and Quebec all desperately want – a real NHL team of their own. Canadian hockey fans certainly help keep the team afloat, but there is another compelling story about the hard luck town with a heart and their love for a big league team that has never (yet) won a championship. Director Mary Wall has made a movie about that story. The film is called *The Fan Connection* because the story is more about the fans than the team, more about how it feels to be a fan after half a century of Sabres hockey. What you realize is that the story of Sabres fans is really the story of a city holding on to its dignity after generations of setbacks.

Mary Wall profiles typical fans of the team. Laid-off steel workers, now seniors. A thrilled, optimistic fan “with a touch of cerebral palsy.” A mom and daughter who cope with the early death of dad by taking up his enthusiasm for the team. The profiles give an intimate glimpse of loss in the town and in the persistence of hope.

Since 1950, tens of thousands of jobs have been lost. Buffalo’s population has dropped by more than half to just over a quarter of a million people (about the same size as Windsor, when once they were bigger than Vancouver). It is not the same Queen City it was back when it was awarded an expansion team. People used to joke that Toronto built the CN Tower to see what was happening in Buffalo, but now people don’t really talk about Buffalo at all.

Yet, despite those setbacks and despite never winning the Stanley Cup, Buffalo’s team has persevered and even succeeded in the most important way. They have survived, outlasting other expansion teams in Atlanta, Hartford, Brooklyn, Cleveland, Minnesota, Winnipeg and Quebec.

The film's moral is embedded in that story of perseverance. Mark, the superfan with cerebral palsy, explains his attachment to the team through his own experience fighting his disease: "there's something about the sport of hockey that I just relate to, the fact that it is all about hard work. I know the feeling of constantly having to bust your ass to get where you want to be. And my love for the city."

The Sabres have twice been to the Stanley Cup finals (1975 and 1999) and both times seen the Cup given away in their own barn – to the other team. Since those highs, the team has been so poor for so long that fans only hope for a chance to make the playoffs. Indeed, the last time they won a playoff series was in 2007 (they lost the next round to the Ottawa Senators in 5 games). The last time they even made the playoffs was 2010-2011.

The film makes it clear that these hard times makes the team all the more endearing, all the more important to the fans, and all the more connected to the city that has seen more than its share of the same. Every time someone mentions the problems with the Sabres, the film splices in scenes of boarded up buildings, abandoned houses, and empty businesses. While in a city like Toronto the fans turn on the Leafs when they lose (remember the paperbag fan days?) a reverse association is true in Buffalo.

There are moments when the line separating us from Buffalo has dissolved. Their City Hall, airport, and malls all fly the Maple Leaf alongside the Stars and Stripes. When Canadian teams play there, it is hard to tell who the home team is by the roar of the crowd. The Sabres fans might be quieter and fewer, but they are still there when the

Canadians go back home across the river. They are still there, in the East Division, almost completely invisible to Canadian hockey fans when once they were firmly part of the season's' rituals.

The North Division might have Canadians dreaming of filling it out with more teams – in Quebec, in Hamilton, maybe even more – but it takes a touching film like *The Fan Connection* to realize and remember that there are hockey towns outside of Canada, filled with fans who are deeply invested in the game. The film turns this history into a story of hope and community.

Now that the Sabres have a new owner and the 'embrace the tank' phase has led to drafting budding superstars like Jack Eichel and Rasmus Dahlin, the Queen City fans are starting to hope again. The roar you hear at the border might be the Niagara River flowing between us and them, but it might also be a thunderous herd of Sabres fans cheering a game you haven't been watching. Those fans are not going anywhere anytime soon.

They are the only fans who chant the city name not the team name. The new logo drops the sabre for a Buffalo, kind of making them the Buffalo Buffaloes. There is no doubt that the city and its team are inextricably linked in their shared fates. When the puck drops though, the score is reset, the possibility of a win offsets all the past losses. As Mark the superfan says, "Nothing else matters when I'm in my seats."



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