In Conversation with Renee Hess of Black Girl Hockey Club

Allain, Kristi A. and Renee Hess.

Journal of Emerging Sport Studies
ISSN: 2562-3184
DOI: 10.26522/jess.v8i.4346
Publisher: Brock University

In conversation with Renee Hess of Black Girl Hockey Club

Kristi Allain

St. Thomas University

Renee Hess

Black Girl Hockey Club

Abstract

Renee Hess founded Black Girl Hockey Club in 2018 as a way to create a sense of community of Black women who identify as hockey fans. She currently works as the organization's Executive Director and collaborates with its many committees organizing social, educational, and advocacy activities all centered around anti-racism. Outside of this role, Hess holds a Master's degree in Literature and works as the Associate Director of Service Learning at La Sierra University in California. This text is a transcript and related commentary on Black Girl Hockey Club written by sociologist Kristi Allain based on her conversation with Hess about the importance of leaning into discomfort around committing to change, inauthentic displays of solidarity and progress, and the importance for Black women to feel a sense of joy and community among other like-minded folks when participating in hockey.

J E
S S

Hockey Conference – Special Issue

Journal of Emerging Sport Studies

Volume 8, (2023): St. Catharines, Ontario

Renee Hess's desire to see more diversity amongst hockey fans and to make all levels of the sport more accessible for Black and other racialized folk (as well as those marginalized by their gender, sexuality, or disability) propelled her to found Black Girl Hockey Club (BGHC). This organization sits alongside other activist groups like You Can Play, GForce Sports and the Hockey Diversity Alliance, calling for a commitment to racial, gender and sexual diversity in hockey, particularly at the highest and most popular levels of the sport.

At its inception in 2015, BGHC was a grassroots organization with few noticeable ties to elite-level men's hockey. It has since become a social movement, supporting a BIPOC fandom and providing hockey scholarships for young Black women, mentoring for young Black professionals in the hockey business, and education and training for allies in the hockey community.

For scholars like myself, who have been working to connect with these hockey stakeholders in the interest of making hockey a better place, the success of BGHC provides important lessons about the limits and possibilities of activism to produce social change. Looking at BGHC also highlights the differences between the tactics and goals of activists and scholars.

BGHC has an incremental approach to social change, working with teams individually and building personal relationships. In this way, Renee Hess demonstrates that some change in hockey culture is possible. She shows that within men's ice hockey in particular, it is important to meet teams where they are, considering their needs and the needs of their surrounding communities. She educates hockey stakeholders and community members and provides important opportunities for these groups to work together.

Her work shows us the important ways that National Hockey League (NHL) teams work as gatekeepers: creating the possibilities for social change more broadly, but also potentially limiting these possibilities. Due to their prestige, when NHL teams adopt BGHC's initiatives, they have the real potential to have a cascading impact, influencing and informing what forms of activism are legitimate and allowable for less prestigious but still influential teams and leagues. Importantly, these are the spaces where many hockey players and stakeholders get their start and learn what it is to be a hockey player.

The presence of Hess and other BGHC members as Black women experiencing joy in the remarkably white world of men's elite-level hockey is its own transgressive act. By disrupting the social space and its taken-for-granted homogeneity, athletes, fans and others are forced to confront what hockey is and who it is for. Hess moves that act of subversion even further when she asks hockey allies to "get uncomfortable" and talk about race and racism. It is through these acts that hockey's inclusions and exclusions become visible.

In the wake of new and ongoing allegations of abuse (Stephens, 2021), racism (Ketko, 2022), sexual violence (Burke, 2022) and cover-up within the world of men's elite-level hockey, and concerns about the growing unaffordability of the game for youth and families, Hess has an opportunity to open up new conversations and to expand the possibilities of her activism. As scholars of ice hockey, we also have an opportunity to engage her and other activists in conversations about the possibilities of this work and spaces for fruitful collaborations.

Kristi Allain talks to Hess about her advocacy and her plans to make hockey a better place, particularly for racialized people. This interview has been edited for clarity.

KA: To start, can you tell me about the genesis of Black Girl Hockey Club?

RH: Yes, so I am not a lifelong hockey fan. I came to hockey as an adult. I was really looking for something. I wanted to be part of a fandom that was exciting and that was different and new.

Coming from California, I don't have a lot of in-person friends who are hockey fans because even though California has three hockey teams, it doesn't really feel like a hockey place. Too much sunshine and palm trees. And so, at the time—back before Black Girl Hockey Club started—I was writing for like a pop culture website and I reached out to a fellow pop culture writer who I knew. We had similar interests, but she was also a sports fan, and I was like, "Being [a] pop culture [fan] and kind of nerdy and geeky seems really incongruent with being a hockey fan. So, how do those two things mesh, and can you give me a primer on how to engage in hockey?" And she did just that.

She sent me to websites and YouTube pages that had her favorite hockey videos, and players, and teams doing stuff. And I started looking at the sport in an academic way. I started researching it, listening to games, getting familiar with the language of the sport. I ended up going to my very first hockey game with my husband, who is white, and his brother, also white. And one with a girlfriend, a non-Black girlfriend, and I was hooked. The sport is fast. It's fun to watch. It's exciting.

I immediately fell in love with watching the live game, but I also noticed right off the bat that there were no other Black women in that arena. There weren't [a lot of] Black folks in general. Once in a while I would see a Black man, but not [any] Black women there to enjoy the game. Maybe working at the arena or doing concessions or tickets, but not there to enjoy hockey.

[In late 2015 or early 2016] I started looking online to see if I could find other Black girl hockey fans. I put out a call and we started a Twitter chat group called the Black Girl Hockey Club, and we decided we wanted to get together and go see a game. The Black Girl Hockey Club got together for the first time to go see a game in December of 2018 in Washington DC, with about 50 women and their kids, their family members. And it was a blast. So many of those women had never experienced anything like that, where they could come together with folks who shared a cultural background with them and enjoy the game of hockey. We got to go to a Washington Capitals game. They had just won the cup and they did it with two Black owners as well as two Black players on the team: Devante Smith-Pelly and Madison Bowey. We were lucky enough to meet those guys that night, and they were surprised to see this group [of Black women] come together [to watch hockey].

I realized that we could do more than just go to games. There was an opportunity to build a network, a community in this space and do some good in the hockey community. So I spent most of 2019 kind of wrestling with how that would look. I was an English teacher, not a business major. I don't know anything about running a business or starting a nonprofit. But I had been really passionate about this topic. And even before Black Girl Hockey Club came into fruition, I had started thinking about writing about Black women in hockey or the lack of Black women in hockey and what that looked like.

KA: Tell me about the work that Black Girl Hockey Club does now.

RH: [In 2019] we filed for nonprofit status. We started getting together and having events, then COVID hit and we weren't able to really do anything in-person after that. We were kind of figuring out a new game plan. What is this fan club going to do when we can't get together? [And then] George Floyd was murdered, as we were trying to figure that out. And that became a catalyst for so many folks in the States and abroad to discuss racial inequities in all sorts of communities.

I personally took it upon myself to kind of re-evaluate. What did I want this, the purpose of this nonprofit, to be? Are we a fan club? Are we a networking opportunity? What are [we]? We were already doing scholarships. That [was] an opportunity to work in the community, but what more could we do and how could we really take a stance?

In May or June of 2020, I ended up writing what I like to call my manifesto and sharing it on the Black Girl Hockey Club Instagram Live. I ended up talking to professional hockey player Saroya Tinker on that same Instagram Live, and we talked about race, hockey, community building, George Floyd, policing and all of those really difficult topics that you don't really hear about too much in hockey. We just started opening up a conversation, giving hockey players and fans an opportunity to talk about being Black in hockey spaces where these conversations weren't really happening much before 2020.

We were lucky enough to be able to host digital events [with BIPOC hockey players and administrators]. We did one with the Penguins. We had Kim Davis come on and talk with us. [We had] Joel Ward, Blake Bolden, and Sarah Nurse, talking about their experiences. Not always the negative stuff but also the joys of being Black and being in this space together.

KA: Can you tell me about how the Get Uncomfortable campaign was started and its goals?

RH: [In the] 2020-2021 hockey season we launched the Get Uncomfortable campaign, which is an advocacy campaign. We've got a digital pledge that folks can read over and sign. It has always been aimed at allies because we don't need Black folks getting more uncomfortable in hockey. We're uncomfortable enough. [The campaign] is here to stir up some conversation with our allies, whether they're at work, or at school, or in the ice rink.

[The goal is to get people] talking about these topics [racism and equity] that aren't necessarily broached in spaces when Black folks aren't around. We had immediate success. Folks wanted to hop on board. They wanted to be a part of it.

We had professional NHL [National Hockey League] and OHL [Ontario Hockey League] teams — we were able to get folks like the Los Angeles Kings, and the Pittsburgh Penguins, and the Maple Leafs to sign on to the pledge and all that really does is open up a dialogue between Black Girl Hockey Club and an organization. You know, [signing on] gives us access to these organizations and allows us to offer insight and suggestions into how they can be better for Black folks in in hockey.

And for the 2021-2022 season, we launched our second campaign under the Get Uncomfortable umbrella, which is Get Uncomfortable in the Workplace. So, it's focusing on how folks can do these things specifically in work environments. Whatever little bit of expertise you might have in your space, how can you use that to be more anti-racist? So, all the teams that we visit, our signatories of the Get Uncomfortable campaign, we're working closely, not just with them, but their communities, their executives, and their teams to really make an impact in those communities.

Folks are always asking, "What about the teams that don't want to sign? Do you try to get more people to sign?" That's not really my mission. I'm really more focused on how to engage with the people who are excited to be engaged. I'm not trying to force anybody to not be racist. I'm going to just focus on the folks that want to do good in this space.

KA: I love the language of getting uncomfortable. What does it mean to get uncomfortable? What do you hope will come out of those uncomfortable conversations?

RH: The tenets of the Get Uncomfortable campaign are to encourage Black girls to get involved in hockey, to educate our allies on how to be better within hockey spaces, to have those uncomfortable conversations, and then to employ Black women in all levels of hockey, from the ice to the C-suites. Those uncomfortable conversations really surround those topics — how best to encourage Black girls to get involved, [the] obstacles, gatekeeping tactics. It's not just financial. It's not just getting folks, Black kids excited about hockey, but it's also retention. It's also community safety, transportation, location of ice rinks, conversations like that. [These conversations] really force people to think outside of the box and, and shift the narrative from "Black people just don't like hockey" to "why aren't there more Black folks involved, and what happens to these kids that start a learn-to-play program and then cycle out? Is it always financial or are there other reasons?"

Keeping all organizations accountable [is important]. How many Black folks are [in an organization]? [Have] you hired [Black folk]? Why not? Why aren't you looking in untraditional spaces, talking with

teams that have access to HBCUs [historically Black colleges and universities]? How do you connect with those types of schools and various programs that are not necessarily the same place where you get all your hockey applicants? And so, those are what those conversations look like, really digging deep into the reasons why Black folks aren't being hired, they're not playing hockey, they're not going to games and then working with those teams to slowly but surely address some of those issues.

KA: We've seen some alarming incidents of racism in the NHL [during the 2021-2022 season), for example, the fan reactions to Nazem Kadri during the playoffs. If we were to take the temperature of hockey right now, how are we doing in terms of anti-racism and equity?

RH: It's really not a scorecard. There's not a grade I can give hockey, because while hockey as a whole is a very white, very cisgender male sport, that's not necessarily indicative of hockey communities everywhere. There are pockets that are definitely not as diverse, homogenized and closed off from diversity. But every team in every city, every league across these nations [United States and Canada], our nations, have different needs and different expectations for community engagement. The NHL leads the way for the minor [leagues] and the various leagues across our two countries. When the NHL is taking a stance, they're showing these other leagues, these other organizations, that it's okay. That it's good to do things to support their players of color and their employees of color. But when they don't, and when they fail to take action, it shows the public that they're really not ready to take ownership of some of the things that their fans are feeling emboldened to do [such as racist taunts of players like the NHL's Nazem Kadri].

I know, at the highest level of the NHL, they're truly wanting to facilitate change, but that trickle down isn't really working. I think it's got to be a little more focused and purposeful throughout all the levels of hockey. The NHL cannot, they can't do it all, even though we would love for them to show us exactly how it should be done, so that USA Hockey, and Hockey Canada, and all the minor leagues can follow suit. What I find is it's really more of working with individuals within these organizations and finding co-conspirators and allies within these spaces who are willing to step up to the status quo, because ultimately that's what it is, this is the status quo. This is the way things have always been done.

Unless there is a huge upheaval, there's not going to be a shift in this narrative, and Black Girl Hockey Club is trying to shift that narrative from the inside out. So, it's hard when you say, "What's the temperature of hockey"? It's hot and cold, you know? All over the country it's different: in Pittsburgh versus Chicago, versus Carolina, versus Toronto.

When I went to Toronto just last month, for our event that we did with the Maple Leafs, it was amazing to see how rich the hockey community, the Black hockey community, is in that space. How much support they have from the Maple Leafs, and the [Toronto] Six [Premier Hockey Federation], and just the hockey community in general. When you get folks like Saroya Tinker and Sarah Nurse in the same

room, my mind is blown. But I know it can't be like that everywhere because they don't have the foundation yet. And so, it's different. It's different all across the nation. Literally every single team that we talked to — the needs are different and the engagement in Black communities is different. And so, we work slowly as an organization. We work case by case. [We] really try to take our time in engaging with various organizations because it's clear that folks in that organization are interested in what we do. It's just a matter of getting that NHL hockey glacier to slowly move in the right direction.

I do think that there are a lot of folks that want to see positive change come to hockey. But my God, there are so many who don't. So, it's a push and pull all the time. It really is.

KA: Are there good models or teams that you can point to that are doing anti-racism work well?

RH: You know what? There are definitely good models across the NHL, and the AHL [American Hockey League], the OHL.

One of the first teams to really put their money where their mouth is was the Erie Otters, who are part of the OHL, out of Pennsylvania. We hosted a Get Uncomfortable panel digitally with them at the end of 2020. We talked to their staff and their players about how to more authentically engage their community and some of the issues that might come up when they do engage with their community. I'll often talk about the Seattle Kraken because they have these amazing hiring practices in place and they have benefits and bonuses that come with diversity hires and I think that's a great embedded institutional policy of really engaging Black community members. I mentioned Toronto, they really gave us carte blanche to do whatever we needed to do to have a successful community event. We handpicked some really amazing folks to come out and spend time together, like our local scholarship awardees and their families and stuff like that. And so most of the organizations that we've signed with and that we've spent time in their communities are really doing something special.

There's not one way of doing it right. Every team and every city has different needs, and has a different way of [doing this work]. What the Seattle Kraken have done in their hiring practices and the way that Toronto really supports their Black athletes [is commendable].

I've been talking with the Penguins for a year about how to authentically connect with their Black hockey players in Pittsburgh. One of the [initiatives that Pittsburgh] came up with was creating the Willie O'Ree Academy, giving nine weeks of free play to local Black hockey players. [Pittsburgh has] 30 players, right now, in their program, and this is only the second year that they've done it. Just doing something like that, it's incredibly special for their city because they have so many youth leagues in that area. And can you imagine, 30 different youth leagues with one Black player in each of them, and they all come together? Those 30 kids come together at the Willie O'Ree Academy and they're like, “Hey, I'm not the only one!” So [these kids] can get to know each other and support one another.

So, every city kind of has its own specific needs. There are some teams that are doing really amazing stuff. There's not one team that's doing it all, but everybody is doing what works for them.

KA: I've heard you use the word authentic and talk about authentic inclusion. What do you mean by authentic inclusion?

RH: Well, we kicked off Pride Month today, right? And the joke is [that] corporations turn super gay in the month of June and then July 1 they're like, "No, we're not, we're going back to our regular scheduled program." So that's an example of an inauthentic way to engage with the LGBTQ community. And so, when we're talking about authenticity in engagement with Black communities, I'm talking about not just doing stuff with Black communities in February [Black history month]. [For example], talking about advertising in a different way. [The NHL] have Black women wearing their jerseys. Even though that's marketing, it still gives Black fans like me an opportunity to see somebody who looks like me in hockey, which even three years ago we weren't really seeing. Other ways are really engaging in local Black communities. Bringing in community leaders into hockey spaces, inviting those folks and their students to come and experience hockey. Not just recycling the same partners, but going outside of that.

Over the years working with various clubs, it's really about getting them to think differently and to see where their blind spots are. I think probably the biggest blind spot that I ever did see in hockey was when I first connected with the Carolina Hurricanes back in 2019. [I] asked them, "Are you working with the local HBCU?" And first they didn't know what that was. I had to tell them, "Those are historically Black colleges and universities, and there's like eight or twelve of them in Raleigh, right where your arena is. Do you ever go there? Do you ever try to get students to come and work with you from there?" And they hadn't even thought about it. It wasn't even on their radar.

It was really cool the day that we actually were in their arena, they had a college colors night that included, for the very first time, two HBCUs. That was something that they never thought to even try, to engage with their HBCs. We also brought over some students from two of the local HBCUs, from their journalism and their sports management programs. [The team] automatically assumed that those kids wouldn't be interested in hockey. That they're more interested in basketball and football, and they just never gave them a chance. And on the flipside, these kids have never even thought about engaging in hockey. They didn't even know what was going on in that arena. They're like, "I drive past it every day and I never knew that they played hockey in here. Are they hiring interns?" So, getting those connections, making those things happen, that's the best way to kind of go about that. Just thinking outside the box and helping people see those blind spots.

KA: I have one last question and I want to come back to something you said earlier. You spoke about the joy of being Black in a hockey space. Can you tell me more about that?

RH: You know, I honestly think it's important for Black folks to feel joy wherever and whenever. There is something really special about being a Black hockey fan and meeting up with other Black hockey fans and walking into a space that is not coded for you, and walking in with complete confidence, and joy, and a little bit of swag, and having a great time. There is no better feeling than going to a hockey game with Black Girl Hockey Club. I feel like Beyoncé walking into Coachella or something, just strutting my stuff. I've got my girls behind me, and we're going to cause some havoc in a hockey arena at a town near you. There's really nothing quite like it.

Black Girl Hockey Club is built on a love and a care for Black women. But it's not just Black women. We've got Black men, and biracial families, and white women, and LGBTQ fellas that are coming and hanging out with us and spending time together because they know that this is an open and loving organization that prioritizes Black women. So, as long as you're down with loving Black women, then everyone is invited. That attitude cultivates a very positive, very enriching environment. We lead with love. We lead with joy. We know that trauma is out there. We know that it exists. We know that it happens, and it probably happens on a regular basis to a lot of us, but that is not our focus when we're in that space. We want to focus our energy on uplifting one another, taking up space and making more [space] for other folks. We couldn't do that if we were always concentrated on the negative, so, we've concentrated on the joy and whenever it gets hard, which it does all the time, we go back to the joy.

Acknowledgements: Kristi Allain would like to thank Ornella Nzindukiyimana for her thoughtful comments on this interview and Cheryl MacDonald and Jonathon Edwards for their work on this special edition.

Funding: This work was generously supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Connections Grant.

References

Burke, A. (2022, August 12). Quebec City police reopening probe into 2014 Gatineau Olympiques alleged group sexual assault, league says. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/quebec-city-police-looking-at-reviewing-investigation-alleged-group-sex-assault-1.6549383

Ketko, T. (2022, May 24). NHLPA condemns 'racist, hate-filled' comments directed at Nazem Kadri. SportsNet. https://www.sportsnet.ca/nhl/article/nhlpa-condemns-racist-hate-filled-comments-directed-at-nazem-kadri/

Stephens, M. (2021, December 15). Blackhawks reach settlement in negligence lawsuit over Kyle Beach abuse. The Hockey News. https://thehockeynews.com/news/blackhawks-reach-settlement-in-negligence-lawsuit-over-kyle-beach-abuse

Westhead, R. (2022, July 29). MPs request judicial inquiry, Conservatives call for outser of Hockey Canada executives, board. TSN. https://www.tsn.ca/mps-request-judicial-inquiry-conservatives-call-for-ouster-of-hockey-canada-executives-board-1.1830527