

Who won the game?

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In the early 1970s, as a recently arrived immigrant from Ireland, I was gradually made aware of the role ice hockey played in the Canadian psyche. In 1972, both the Cold War and the Soviet Union still existed, and the Soviets were as fiercely proud of their national hockey team as Canadians were of theirs. By September of that year, an 8-game series between the 2 giants was tied at 3 wins each, with 1 tie. Today — Sept. 28, 1972 — the big clincher was being held in Moscow.

The match began around noon, Calgary time, and the lunch break for operating room personnel had dragged on as staff of all types huddled around the tube. We were in the dying seconds of the third period and the score was 5–5.

There was an urgent interruption from the operating room supervisor — a call to the front desk to deal with a surgical emergency, a suspected ruptured aneurysm. A cardiovascular surgeon and anesthesiologist — that was me — immediately rushed to the patient's side.

He had been admitted a few days earlier for elective resection of an abdominal aortic aneurysm, and had collapsed while watching the same hockey game that held my colleagues in its spell. He had the good fortune to collapse in a 4-bed room in which a general surgeon happened to be at the bedside of one of his roommates. As the patient descended into profound hemorrhagic shock, chance was once again in his favour: the surgeon made a rapid working diagnosis of a ruptured aneurysm and pushed the dying patient, lying back in his bed, across a hallway into the main operating room, which happened to be on the same level. Luck continued to be with him, because an appropriate surgical team, including my cardiovascular colleague and me, was available immediately. We had been about to embark on elective surgery on a child with a patent ductus arteriosus, a case that was of course put on hold to make room for the emergency.

The "anesthesia" consisted of oxygen and rapid intravenous infusion of Ringer's lactate solution until blood became available. Although the patient was initially pulseless and obviously near death, his cardiogram remained in sinus



rhythm. Following cross clamping of the upper abdominal aorta and the eventual transfusion of 13 units of blood, the patient's vital signs made an excellent recovery. As he improved, anesthetic agents were introduced and a synthetic graft was used to bypass the ruptured aortic segment.

To the amusement of the medical and nursing staff, who were all aware of the story, the patient had but a single question upon regaining consciousness in the recovery room. "Who won the game?" he asked fervently.

The game and series result? Win, win for Canada, we told him. Paul Henderson scored the vital goal with a mere 34 seconds left in the game.

It was quite the inauguration for a green Irishman. However, I decided that I could never take this game quite as seriously as our patient did.

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