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Best sport city contest draws fans worldwide

Indiana sports fans may gloat. But Toronto still has cities such as Atlanta beat, Star analysis finds

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Take heart, jilted Toronto sports lovers.

Fans in 16 other major North American cities have had their dreams shattered and their collective sporting identities kicked around worse than we have over the past decade.

A *Star* analysis of winning percentages among professional sports teams in 37 North American cities since 2000 shows Toronto ranks in the middle of the pack.

Our city's legendary sporting mediocrity places us well below Indianapolis, Boston and Vancouver, which top the list of civic sporting overachievers.

But fans in major American cities including Chicago, Miami, Atlanta and Washington can only admire the 51 per cent winning percentage Toronto's pro baseball, football, basketball and hockey clubs have recorded since 2000.

More than 500 people submitted their best guesses on the top – and bottom – sporting cities as part of a contest launched on thestar.com last Monday. Submissions flowed in from across North America and as far away as China, New Zealand, Singapore and Bolivia. Only four correctly named the winner.

For its relatively diminutive size and low Midwestern profile, Indianapolis is a sporting powerhouse. The city's National Football League Colts and National Basketball Association Pacers have logged wins 66 per cent of the time since 2000.

Perhaps best known for the Indianapolis 500, the city is home to the NCAA and many of its major tournaments, has hosted more than 400 national and international championships since 1980 and will welcome the Super Bowl in 2012.

They built this city on sports, says Bill Benner, a former sports



TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

To measure the relative sporting success of major North American cities, the Toronto Star ranked 37 cities with at least two professional sports teams based on their winning percentages since 2000. Teams — which were drawn from baseball, hockey, football and basketball — were awarded bonus points for making the playoffs or winning a championship. The results above rank the winningest — and losingest — across the continent.

WHY WE CORF AS OFTEN AS BIRG

When the Maple Leafs win, the collective chant goes "We won."

When they lose, we often make a subtle linguistic shift: "They lost."

It's the difference between BIRGing (basking in reflective glory) and CORFing (casting off reflective failure), say sports academics who have developed an entire language to describe the behaviours and psychologies of sports fans.

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columnist at *The Indianapolis Star*. "Indianapolis, beginning about 30 years ago, used sports ... as an economic development strategy. Using sports as the cornerstone played out beyond anyone's imagination."

With sporting success has come civic pride, says Stephanie Parks, one-quarter of a diehard Indianapolis family of sports fanatics.

"Being a sports capital is closely tied with the city's sense of self," says the mother of two athletic children seeking to follow in the footsteps of their pro heroes. "We own two businesses and during football season we have 'blue Friday,' wherein everyone is to dress up in blue or wear their Colts shirts."

Some experts say the most beloved pro sports teams are the ones that adopt the prevailing identity of the city where they play.

In Indianapolis, that means mirroring the city's Midwestern values, says Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard.

"In Indiana, it's okay to win, but you have to win the right way. You have to do it with a strong work ethic. You have to do it as a team. You just can't do it any other way here."

Only about 170 kilometres from Indianapolis, Cincinnati sits at the far opposite end of the winner/loser list, in dead last.

The one-time greatness of Reds players like Pete Rose and Tom Seaver has long since vanished and the NFL Bengals scraped together a humiliating 4-11 season last year.

"This city is very used to bad management and ownership, so a losing season is nothing new," says Cincinnati sports devotee Ian Strasburger. "It's going to be 20 years next year since our last championship (the 1990 Reds) so yes, it is painful. ... The day we win will be the happiest day of my life, if that ever happens."

Topping the list of Canadian sports cities – and ranking No. 3 overall – is Vancouver. The surging Canucks and perennially competitive CFL Lions win nearly 63 per cent of the time.

"There's a way that we identify with our team that makes us want to show off," says Todd Serotiuk, a Torontonian-turned-Vancouverite who now studies the Canucks with surgical precision. "I always get more excited when the Canucks are on *Hockey Night in Canada* versus a local broadcast because the whole country will see us shine."

Montreal ranks sixth and Edmonton, which declared itself the "City of Champions" in the 1980s amid dynasty Oilers and Eskimo teams, sits today in a far less lofty ninth place. Calgary's 53 per cent winning percentage puts it in 16th spot. That leaves Toronto, the country's biggest sports market, in 21st spot overall and dead last among Canadian cities.

Toronto's last championship was the Blue Jays' 1993 World Series win. Prior to that, the now infamous Stanley Cup victory by the Toronto Maple Leafs 42 years ago continues to haunt. The Raptors, Leafs, Jays and Argos all toiled together in out-of-the-playoffs obscurity last season. All four.

"If I'm a huge Maple Leaf fan, I identify with them and get vicarious achievement through them when they win. When they lose, we want to distance ourselves from the loss and how it reflects on us personally," says Annemarie Farrell, an assistant professor of sport management at Ithaca College in Ithaca, N.Y.

The relationship between losing teams and their fans is complex, Farrell says.

Perennial losers, like the Leafs, can create an intriguing loyalty response in fans called BIRFing (basking in reflective failure), she says. "Your psychological identity connects with the losing, or the underdog aspect or the 'maybe next year' sentiment."

Shawn McBride, vice-president of Ketchum Sports Marketing in Boston, says the emotional investment in losers is, in some ways, even more unifying than cheering for winners.

"You look at the Leafs and (Chicago) Cubs and, until recently, the (Boston) Red Sox and there's a more deeply embedded connection that fans have to those teams. It's a badge of pride that you, as a fan are sticking by your team

"I really do think it affects our collective mood and our collective community pride," says Gordon Kirke, an avid Toronto sports fan and lawyer who has represented the Argos, Raptors, Jays, Leafs and more than 40 pro hockey players.

"I see the devotion to sports and the following of sports to be akin in some ways to militarism in history. Instead of your sports teams wearing jerseys, there would be military groups bearing your coat of arms or flag. There was a patriotic pride in how well your military does in relation to others. And even if your soldiers came back with the snout beat out of them, you'd hope by getting some tougher guys or making some changes, you'd fare better next time."

Michael Oriard, a cultural historian at Oregon State University and author of six books related to sports and culture, expresses that social cohesion in terms of "psychic" benefits that come with professional sports.

"What else do we find in our lives that we can care about in communion with a lot of other people who care about the same thing?" asks Oriard, who played football with the Kansas City Chiefs and the Hamilton Tiger-Cats in the early 1970s. "The thing we care about may be trivial, but the act of caring is enough in itself."

and showing your loyalty."

The opposite of this – a phenomenon experienced by some fans of perpetual winners such as the New York Yankees – is coined CORSing (casting off reflective success).

"Yankees fans who say, 'I'm tired of us always winning' use a method of distancing themselves from what they may think it means to be a fan," Farrell says.

Whatever the marketing approach, the power of sport to create civic identity is extremely powerful, she says.

"Some of the longest relationships we have in our lives aren't with people, but with teams. When you're an infant, you're put in your Maple Leafs jumpsuit, and you're buried in coffins with logos on it. We all want to be part of something bigger. It lets us walk down a hallway and see someone in a Maple Leafs hat and say 'You're one of us.' "

– Robert Cribb