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# RESEARCH NOTE

#PARG 2024-40RN

## Ottawa Black Bears

A new professional lacrosse team in Ottawa

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### Introduction

On February 21, 2024, the Ottawa Black Bears became the newest franchise of the National Lacrosse League (NLL) (2024a). For the 2024-2025 season, Ottawa will be the 15<sup>th</sup> team of the NLL following the relocation of the New York Riptide franchise.



The owner, GF Sports and Entertainment, is partnering commercially with Senators Sports & Entertainment, and will play at the Canadian Tire Centre starting in December 2024. The regular season is 18 games, including nine regular home games.

Our research question is: What is the landscape of the new professional lacrosse team in the professional sports landscape in Ottawa-Gatineau? This research note presents some facts and some reflections regarding the arrival of the new professional team in a relatively unknown sport in the Ottawa-Gatineau region. The archival methodology used to prepare the research note is essentially an examination of documents publicly available, websites, and newspapers' articles.

Important notice:

Data for this research note was collected between February 21 - March 8, 2024.



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## National Lacrosse League

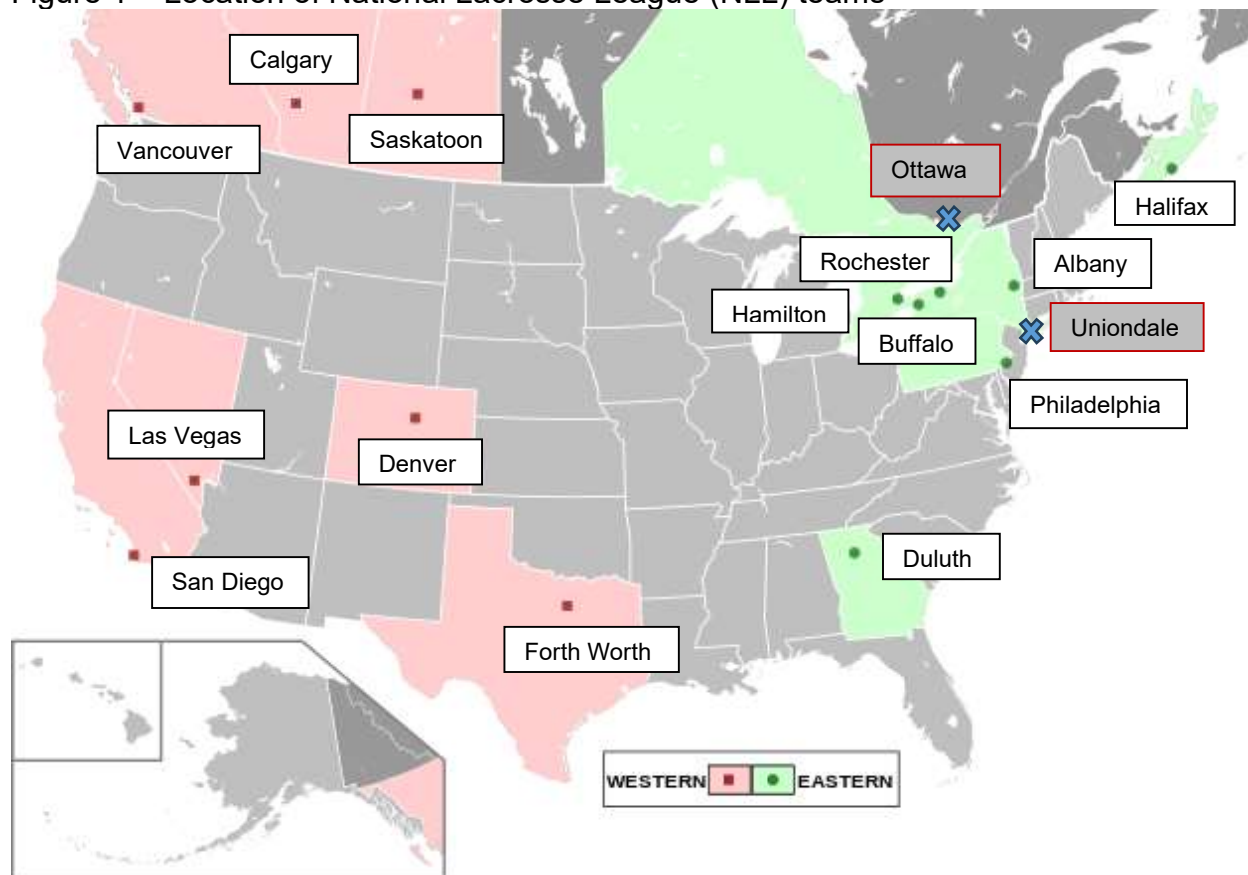
*Professional lacrosse league*



The National Lacrosse League (NLL) is a men's professional box lacrosse league in North America (Wikipedia, 2024a). Lacrosse sport is divided between box (indoor) and field (outdoor). While hockey is Canada's official national winter sport, lacrosse is Canada's official national summer sport (*National Sports of Canada Act, 1994*).

Brett Froad is the NLL Commissioner. The National Lacrosse League (NLL) (2024b) is a 15-team league (6 in Canada, including the Ottawa Black Bears, and 9 in United States, excluding the New York Riptide). Figure 1 place on a map the various National Lacrosse League (NLL) teams and Table 1 presents the teams.

Figure 1 – Location of National Lacrosse League (NLL) teams



Source: Adapted from Wikipedia (2024a)

Table 1 – National Lacrosse League (NLL) teams

Canadian teams	United States teams
Calgary Roughnecks (Calgary, AB)	Albany FireWolves (Albany, NY)
Halifax Thunderbirds (Halifax, NS)	Buffalo Bandits (Buffalo, NY)
Saskatchewan Rush (Saskatoon, SK)	Colorado Mammoth (Denver, CO)
Toronto Rock (Hamilton, ON)	Georgia Swarm (Duluth, GA)
Vancouver Warriors (Vancouver, BC)	Las Vegas Desert Dogs (Paradise, NV)
	Panther City Lacrosse Club (Forth Worth, TX)
	Philadelphia Wings (Philadelphia, PA)
	Rochester Knighthawks (Rochester, NY)
	San Diego Seals (San Diego, CA)
<b>Ottawa Black Bears</b> (Ottawa, ON) <b>(starting in 2024-2025)</b>	<b>New York Riptide</b> (Uniondale, NY) <b>(last season 2023-2024)</b>

Source: National Lacrosse League (2024b)

### *Game of box lacrosse*

Per the New York Riptide (2024) website:

“Box lacrosse is played inside the confines of an ice hockey rink, with glass and rink boards intact. The playing surface consists of a green dieter turf carpet that is laid down over the hockey ice. Combined, teams score an average of 25 goals during an NLL game. Each game consists of four fifteen-minute quarters. A tie at the end of regulation is decided in sudden-victory overtime. Each team has five runners (forwards, transition players, and defensemen) and a goaltender on the floor during the game. Each team dresses 19 players (17 runners and two goaltenders) per game, and the players rotate on and off the floor in shifts, similar to ice hockey.”

“Lacrosse is a traditional indigenous people’s game and was first encountered by Europeans when French Jesuit missionaries in the St. Lawrence Valley witnessed the game in the 1630s. Lacrosse for centuries was seen as a key element of cultural identity and spiritual healing to Native Americans. Box lacrosse is a modern version of the game that was invented in Canada during the 1920s and 1930s.”

### *New York Riptide*

The New York Riptide was founded in 2018. They are in their 4<sup>th</sup> season (no 2021 season). The team played their 18 games in the regular season, including nine regular home games, between December and April with 2 to 5 games per month. They play on an ice hockey rink in the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum and has a capacity of 13,900 for lacrosse; it is in Uniondale (Long Island). During the 2023-2024, the team is in the middle of the teams in term of standings.



The New York Riptide (2022, 2024) has a roster of 32 players per their website. The head coach is Dan Ladouceur. The coaching staff is composed of 7 people. Both players and coaching staff will probably follow the team. The team also has staff personnel in the front office, for game day, a medical team, and a dance crew of 16 people. However, some individuals may or not relocate to Ottawa. For example, the medical team and the dance crew may involve local people as many are probably part-time with the team and will not commute.

Tickets are available for single game (\$24 to \$79 per game), season pass (center (\$315) and corners (\$225)), VIP boxes (Front row glass – 6 seats (\$3,550), Platform – 6 seats (\$2,800), Concourse center – 4 seats (\$1,620), Concourse corner 4 seats (\$1,440). Ticket prices are in US\$ (New York Riptide, 2024). The average number of tickets is 4,800 per game, including complimentary tickets (Gross, 2024).

“The Riptide are the NLL’s third franchise in New York. The Saints played at the Coliseum from 1989-2003 and the Titans played a handful of home games at the Coliseum during their existence from 2006-09.” (Gross, 2024)

The New York Riptide has several community initiatives, such as tickets to underprivileged communities, children involvement with skills development clinics, and program dedicated to growing lacrosse. The New York Riptide has worked with many different local organizations donating tickets and team gear for fundraisers. Those will probably be transferred to Ottawa and new partnerships will need to be developed. They had television partnerships with ESPN and MSG Networks and radio partners. They will need new local media partners.

### **Partners in the Ottawa Black Bears**

Two partners are involved with the Ottawa Black Bears, GF Sports & Entertainment and Ottawa Senators Sports & Entertainment.

#### *GF Sports & Entertainment*

GF Sports & Entertainment is the owner of the lacrosse franchise.

Per GF Sports (2024) website:

“GF Sports & Entertainment is a live events and sports media entertainment company created by New York-based private equity firm GF Capital Management & Advisors, LLC. Formed in July 2015, GF Sports & Entertainment owns two of the ATP World Tour’s longest running American tournaments, the New York Open and the BB&T Atlanta Open, as well as the New York National Lacrosse League team the New York Riptide.



In addition, GF Sports & Entertainment is partnered with the American Kennel Club (AKC), the leading registry and governing body of canine events in the United States, to further develop and expand the AKC Meet the Breeds® event platform. GF Sports & Entertainment also incubates new and emerging sport concepts utilizing its global expertise and network to help develop niche sports. Such concepts include Wolf Pack Ninjas, which operates ninja-focused events globally. Veteran sport, media and entertainment executive Hank Ratner is a co-investor with GF Capital across the company's various sports properties.”

### *Ottawa Senators Sports & Entertainment*

Established in 1992, the Ottawa Senators / Sénateurs d'Ottawa (officially the Ottawa Senators Hockey Club) is a professional ice hockey team part of the National Hockey League (NHL) - Atlantic division, Eastern Conference. They presently play in the Canadian Tire Centre in Ottawa (Brouard, Perreault and Litalien, 2023).



A new group of owners lead by Michael Andlauer is now in place following the death of Eugene Melnik, the process of selling the team and the Canadian Tire Centre (Brouard, 2022), and the acquisition closing in September 2023 (CBC News, 2023). “And despite playing in Canada, in a market with a population of less than 1 million, the reported sale price of \$950 million US is the highest ever for an NHL franchise.” (Schram, 2023)

### **Potential Success Factors in Ottawa**

Several factors may be examined to determine the potential success in Ottawa-Gatineau of the new team in a new professional sport. They may be the failure factors in New York; the attendance and revenue; the marketing and Ottawa partnership; the costs; the previous experiences with lacrosse teams in Ottawa; the development of lacrosse market in Ottawa-Gatineau and involvement in the community; and the need for long-term commitment.

### *Failure factors in New York*

It may be interesting to review some of the New York team failure factors to understand the situation and be conscious of traps to avoid. Per some commentators (ariesboy897, 2023; Gross, 2024), some failure factors of the New York Riptide include: a low attendance; the loss of their local TV/radio coverage; the quality of the team on the turf; the weaknesses in the marketing of the team; the cost structure; the competitive context of New York.

### *Attendance and revenue*

Attendance is important and a measure of commitment. With 4,800 tickets per game in New York, it is half of what is needed to be financially viable for the team (Gross, 2024). Only 9 home games need to be sold during a season. Lacrosse games were present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at Lansdowne attracting between 8,000 to 12,000 spectators (Capital History, 2017). " 'Ottawa is an incredible market, with an established fan base, and a major-league arena,' Frood [NLL Commissioner] said in the release.' (Canadian Press, 2024).

Revenue could also come from sponsorship and various partnerships. New broadcasting agreement will need to be negotiate for radio and possibly television. Ottawa Senators have plans to build a new arena in downtown Ottawa, which may offer new opportunities for revenues.

### *Marketing and Ottawa partnership*

" 'This is an immense opportunity for our league to fortify our roots in the National Capital Region and to partner with a sophisticated front office in the Senators.' 'We feel this relationship will be a terrific success and are excited and confident in the short- and long-term positioning of the Ottawa Black Bears.' " (Canadian Press, 2024).



" 'We chose Ottawa for many reasons, including the strength of the Senators Sports & Entertainment brand, the demand and rapid growth of box lacrosse in the region, and the fantastic arena,' Erik Baker of GF Sports and Entertainment said in the release. " (Canadian Press, 2024).

It is a low financial risk for the Senators as GF Sports is keeping the franchise (Edwards, 2024). By combining the Ottawa Senators marketing efforts, it is possible to increase the notoriety of the team.

### *Cost*

If the previous location was not successful, cost of operating the team may have been a factor. For example, cost include salaries, marketing efforts, location of arena, travel expenses and other expenses. The annual average salary of players is around \$20,000, with a salary cap for the team of a bit more than \$400,000 (Wikipedia, 2024a). The cost of location of the arena may be reduced as the Senators will offer the arena, and it may be cheaper to play and use the Canadian Tire Centre, in contrast to an arena in Uniondale. Travel expenses may be similar or lower as the distance with the other teams are similar.

The cost of living is advantageous in favor of Ottawa compared to New York. Per Numbeo (2024): “Consumer Prices in New York, NY are 36.5% higher than in Ottawa (without rent); Consumer Prices including Rent in New York, NY are 78.3% higher than in Ottawa; Rent Prices in New York, NY are 169.4% higher than in Ottawa; Restaurant Prices in New York, NY are 27.3% higher than in Ottawa; Groceries Prices in New York, NY are 44.5% higher than in Ottawa; Local Purchasing Prices in New York, NY are 17.2% higher than in Ottawa”

### *Previous experiences with professional lacrosse teams in Ottawa*

Various teams exist in all parts of Canada. We will however focus on two professional lacrosse teams which had activities in Ottawa before the arrival of the Ottawa Black Bears. They were short lives almost 20 years ago.

#### Ottawa Rebel (2001-2003)

Between 2001 until 2003, the Ottawa Rebel was a team in the National Lacrosse League (NLL) based in Ottawa (Wikipedia, 2024g). The Ottawa Rebel, who initially played at the Corel Centre (now Canadian Tire Centre) move to the Ottawa Civic Centre (now TD Place) because the arena was too big and far from downtown (Philly, 2002). Before their relocation in Ottawa, the team was known as the Syracuse Smash in Syracuse, New York, from 1997 until 2000 (Wikipedia, 2024g).

#### Ottawa Titans (2005-2007)

Between 2005 until 2007, the Ottawa Titans were a Junior "A" box lacrosse team from Ottawa (Wikipedia, 2024i). The Titans played in the Ontario Junior Lacrosse League; a league founded in 1933, and still in operations today. The team suspended their operations for the 2008 and 2009 seasons and did not return.

“The Ontario Junior Lacrosse League (OJLL) is considered the most competitive Junior A men's box lacrosse league in the world and the number one source for talent for the National Lacrosse League (NLL). The OJLL is sanctioned by the Ontario Lacrosse Association. It is an 11 team league wherein the top 8 go to the playoffs and battle it out for top spot in Ontario. The Ontario Champion is annually awarded the Iroquois Trophy and moves on to compete against teams from Alberta and British Columbia for the Minto Cup - the Junior A National Box Lacrosse Championship of Canada. Ontario has captured the Minto Cup fifty-six times since 1937. Since the first NLL draft in 1996, sixteen OJLL alumni have been selected first overall.”



## *Development of lacrosse market and involvement in the community*

Compared to traditional sports like hockey, baseball, soccer, football, lacrosse is not as well-known. Some youth associations are operating in Ottawa (Nepean Knights Lacrosse Association (NKMLA), 2024; Gloucester Lacrosse Association (GLA), 2024; Ottawa Capitals, 2024). Both provide competitive and recreational opportunities. Those associations may contribute to developing the lacrosse market in Ottawa-Gatineau. At this point, we will briefly turn our attention to the francophone market, as they are an integral part of the sport ecosystem in the Ottawa region.

“The Nepean Knights Lacrosse Association (NKMLA) provides youth in western Ottawa with the opportunity to play box lacrosse. The mission of the NKMLA is to provide a minor box lacrosse program for youth (boys and girls) aged 4 to 20 living in western Ottawa and the surrounding area. NKMLA promotes the sport of lacrosse in Ottawa and the surrounding area. NKMLA also attempts to foster sportsmanship, fair play and differing levels of competitiveness in a safe and trusted environment; it endeavors to provide local youth with the opportunity to raise their self-esteem through the values of goal-setting, discipline, trust, responsibility and respect for self and others, enabling them to establish a framework for personal improvement that is applicable to all areas of life. The Association is run by volunteers who are dedicated to growing the sport of lacrosse and to helping young people in this region.” (Nepean Knights Lacrosse Association, 2024).

The New York Riptide (2024) is involved in the community. As it is the same owner, GF Sports & Entertainment will probably also want to be involved. The Ottawa Senators Sports & Entertainment are also involved in many ways in the community, and this will continue. For example, the Senators Community Foundation spend \$1,744,418 in 2022 (Brouard, Perreault and Litalien, 2023).



### *Long-term commitment*

The new team need a long-term commitment to develop the team and the fan base. The proximity with players may be an advantage. “Approximately 75% of the league’s players are Canadians and all but four players on the Riptide’s roster live in the Toronto area.” (Gross, 2024).



## Other professional sports in Ottawa-Gatineau

The professional sport landscape or with paid attendance in Ottawa-Gatineau has several teams. In addition to the Ottawa Black Bears of the National Lacrosse League (NLL), Ottawa is home to six other professional sports teams: the Ottawa Senators of the National Hockey League (NHL); the Ottawa Redblacks of the Canadian Football League (CFL); the Ottawa Blackjacks of the Canadian Elite Basketball League (CEBL); the Ottawa Titans of the Frontier League (FL); Atlético Ottawa of the Canadian Premier League (CPL); and the PWHL Ottawa of the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) (Wikipedia, 2024b).

Ottawa-Gatineau also has two major junior ice hockey teams: the Ottawa 67's and the Olympiques de Gatineau (Brouard, Pilon and Webb, 2023). Other semi-professional teams are also present in the region. Universities in the regions also have varsity teams and clubs affiliated with U Sports, OUA and RSEQ: two in Ottawa with Carleton University Ravens and University of Ottawa Gee-Gees, and one in Gatineau with Université du Québec en Outaouais Les Torrents.

### *NHL - men's ice hockey - Ottawa Senators / Sénateurs d'Ottawa*



Established in 1992, the Ottawa Senators / Sénateurs d'Ottawa (officially the Ottawa Senators Hockey Club) is a professional hockey team part of the National Hockey League (NHL) - Atlantic division, Eastern Conference. They presently play in the Canadian Tire Centre in Ottawa.



### *CFL – men's Canadian football - Ottawa Redblacks / Rouge et Noir d'Ottawa*



Starting play in 2014, the Ottawa Redblacks / Rouge et Noir d'Ottawa is a professional Canadian football team of the Canadian Football League (CFL) - East division. They presently play in the TD Place Stadium (formerly the Frank Clair Stadium), an outdoor stadium located at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa.



Previously, the Ottawa Rough Riders were a founder of the CFL in 1958 and played until 1996. Between 2002 and 2005 a new Ottawa franchise of the CFL, the Renegades, played in Ottawa, but the franchise was suspended by the league due to financial difficulties.

*CEBL – men’s basketball - Ottawa Blackjacks*



Founded in 2019, the Ottawa BlackJacks is a professional basketball team part of the Canadian Elite Basketball League (CEBL) - Eastern division. They presently play in the TD Place Arena, an indoor arena located at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa.



*FL – men’s baseball - Ottawa Titans / Titans d’Ottawa*



Established in 2020, their inaugural season was in 2022. The Ottawa Titans is a professional baseball team part of the Frontier League (FL) - East division. They presently play in Ottawa Stadium (previously Raymond Chabot Grant Thornton Park).



“They became the city's seventh professional baseball franchise succeeding the Eastern League's Ottawa Wanderers, the International League's Ottawa Giants, Ottawa Athletics and Ottawa Lynx, the Intercounty Baseball League's Ottawa Fat Cats, as well as the Can-Am League's Ottawa Rapidz and Ottawa Champions. The franchise is one of the expansion teams of the FL, following their merger with the Can-Am League in October 2019.” (Wikipedia, 2024c)

*CPL – men’s soccer – Atlético Ottawa*



Established in 2020, the Atlético Ottawa is a professional soccer club part of the Canadian Premier League (CPL). They presently play in the TD Place, an outdoor stadium located at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa.



“From 2014 to 2019, Ottawa Fury FC competed in American-based soccer leagues, most recently the USL Championship. The Fury dissolved after the 2019 season due to sanctioning issues associated with competing in the United States with the emergence of the domestic Canadian Premier League.” (Wikipedia, 2024f)

*PWHL – women’s ice hockey – Ottawa Titans*



Established in 2023, the PWHL Ottawa is a women’s ice hockey team and part of the Professional Women’s Hockey League (PWHL) / Ligue professionnelle de hockey féminin. They presently play in the TD Place Arena, an indoor arena located at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa.



*OHL – junior men’s ice hockey - Ottawa 67’s*



Established in 1967, during the Canada’s centennial year, the Ottawa 67’s is a major junior ice hockey team part of the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) - East division / Eastern Conference. They presently play in the TD Place Arena (formerly the Ottawa Civic Centre), an indoor arena located at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa.



*LHJMQ – junior men’s ice hockey - Olympiques de Gatineau*



Established in 1973, the Olympiques de Gatineau is a major junior ice hockey team part of the Ligue de Hockey Junior Maritimes Québec (LHJMQ) - Western Conference. They presently play in the Centre Slush Puppy indoor arena located in Gatineau.



*Other semi-professional and amateur sport teams*

A number of semi-professional and amateur teams are located in Ottawa, such as Ottawa Sooners (Canadian football) in the Canadian Junior Football League, Ottawa Junior Riders (Canadian football) in the Quebec Junior Football League, Cumberland Panthers (Canadian football) in the Quebec Junior Football League, Ottawa Swans (Australian football) in the AFL Ontario, and Ottawa Lady Senators (ice hockey) in the Ontario Women’s hockey League (Wikipedia, 2024b).

## *USport / RSEQ – Carleton Ravens, UOttawa Gee-Gees and UQO Torrents*

Carleton University Ravens and University of Ottawa Gee-Gees men's lacrosse varsity clubs are playing in the Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association (CUFLA). Ravens and Gee-Gees are both playing in the East division, and compete for the Baggataway Cup.

### Carleton University



Carleton University Ravens has multiples varsity teams (13) in basketball, fencing, football, hockey, nordic ski, rugby, soccer, golf, rowing, and water polo and 21 varsity clubs, including in men's lacrosse. They presently play in Ottawa.



### University of Ottawa



University of Ottawa Gee-Gees has multiples varsity teams (10) in basketball, football, hockey, rugby, soccer, swimming, and volleyball and 25 varsity clubs, including in men's lacrosse. They presently play in Ottawa.



### Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO)



Université du Québec en Outaouais Les Torrents has only a few varsity teams, namely flag-football, golf, soccer, and volleyball. They presently play in Gatineau.



### **Conclusion**

The relocation and arrival of the Black Bears add another player in the Ottawa sport landscape. This may be positive or negative depending on the stakeholders involved. It will certainly have an impact on other professional sports in Ottawa-Gatineau. The 67's were not happy when the lacrosse Ottawa Rebel team move to their own arena (Philly, 2002). Hopefully, the new partnership will reverse Ottawa's pro lacrosse curse with hopes like baseball (Sali, 2020). The future will tell us what if the adventure lasts and the impact on the community.

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