



FILE PHOTO: ERIC KOZAKIEWICZ

## Oilers, Pronger fiasco highlight Edmonton sports scene in '06

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The past year in Edmonton's sports scene could be likened to a Friday night in the life of an alcohol-fuelled university student: a few hours of jovialness followed by a long, nauseating hangover. While our fair city had its moments of brilliance, the top five sports stories of 2006 came mostly to the dismay of the City of Champions.

### 5. WHL GIVES EDMONTON SECOND CHANCE, OIL KINGS BORN

When the Edmonton Ice left town in a blaze of suck back in 1998, many wondered if—and when—the Dub would ever return to the Alberta capital. With the announcement that Edmonton would be awarded a franchise to begin play in the 2007/08 season, the answers were “yes” and “June 2006.” A contest was held for fans to decide the team's moniker and in November it was decided that they would revive the old Edmonton Oil Kings concept that saw Memorial Cup success in 1963 and 1966. I'm cool with the revival, as long as the team plays more like the Oil Kings than the Ice. That's one franchise that shouldn't rise from the dead.

### 4. RUSH PLAY LACKLUSTRE IN INAUGURAL NHL SEASON

January 2006 saw the National Lacrosse League's Edmonton Rush debut on Rexall turf. It's fairly commonplace for expansion teams to have jitters in their first year, but the Rush went through what looked more like seizures as a first-year franchise. The team handily finished with the league's worst record at 1–15, causing the 30 or so people in Edmonton who actually showed up to the games to wonder if the team's cheerleaders, the Edmonton Crush, could've posted a better record. Fortunately, the Rush have vastly improved their roster for 2006/07; now if only the Crush would follow suit.

### 3. ESKIMOS' HISTORIC PLAYOFF STREAK COMES TO AN END

2006 also marked the first time in 34 years that the Edmonton Eskimos failed to reach the post-season, ending the longest streak of playoff appearances in North American professional sports. Despite losing a crapload of key players from the 2005 Grey Cup-winning squad in the

off-season—especially on defence—the Eskis couldn't resist completely fucking themselves right out of the gate, losing five of their first seven games en route to the second-worst record in the league (7-11), behind only the hapless Hamilton Tiger-Cats. The dismal season even caused long-time president Hugh Campbell to step down at the end of the season. Enjoy the rebuild, boys!

### 2. CHRIS PRONGER DUCKS OUT OF EDMONTON, GIVES NO REASON

What can \$31.25 million buy you these days, other than a decent one-bedroom apartment in this city? One year of Chris Pronger and a proverbial bitch-slap. Oiler fans were shocked to find out—only two days after the playoffs—that their star defenceman wanted out of Oil Country; what was even more shocking is that he decided that Eastern media outlets deserved to be the ones to break it to us. The bombshell sparked a gang of rumours, some of which included Lauren Pronger's disdain for Edmonton, and Chris Pronger's fertilizing of either a local puck bunny or reporter. At the end of the day, however, his reasons for leaving are personal and we'll just have to live with it, especially since every question about it—even those asking if the situation that caused him to leave has been resolved—is answered with some form of, “Fuck off.”

### 1. EDMONTON OILERS CUP RUN

Before the Chris Pronger fiasco took place, the Edmonton Oilers instilled a little bit of magic (and a lot of booze) into this city that hadn't been seen since 1990. The Oilers rolled through the first three rounds of the Stanley Cup Playoffs en route to becoming Western Conference champions before meeting the Carolina Hurricanes in the Stanley Cup Finals. Despite losing playoff hero Dwayne Roloson in game one to Marc-André Bergeron's attempted defence and Andrew Ladd's best Jeff Gillooly impression, the Oilers pushed themselves to the limit, but fell one goal short of tasting victory in game seven. In spite of the loss, the fans in Oil Country continuously showed their appreciation for their boys by putting Oiler flags on cars, drying up beer supplies all over the city and destroying Whyte Avenue phone booths, presumably because they cheered for the Flames.

## Klassen reigns on ice, Zidane ends with a bang of the head—at least they weren't on steroids

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2006 marked the latest in the four-year cycle that brings us both the FIFA World Cup and the Winter Olympics. The creation of the World Baseball Classic added yet another opportunity for international competition between the best in sports. Though these major events were wrapped in steroid accusations and questionable usage of an athlete's head, '06 will be remembered not for its downfalls but for its surprises and departing legends.

### 5. JAPAN WINS WBC

In March, Major League Baseball held the inaugural World Baseball Classic in the hopes of creating marketing appeal in baseball-dominated countries in Asia and Latin America, and to offer baseball fans a chance to see pros compete for their countries. There were some major upsets: Canada beat the heavily favoured United States in the first stage, Cuba knocked off powerhouse Dominican Republic in the semifinals, and Japan took it all home behind major leaguer Ichiro Suzuki and Japanese League Star Daisuke Matsuzaka.

### 4. TALENTED TRIO HANG 'EM UP

Three sports said goodbye to legends in 2006. In Tennis, American great Andre Agassi played his last match in the third round of the US Open, capping off an illustrious 20-year career. Agassi is considered one of the greatest technical players to ever play the game: he's one of only five men to win all four Grand Slam titles, he has seventeen tour wins and an Olympic gold.

In hockey, “The Captain” Steve Yzerman retired after 23 years. Yzerman was one of the youngest captains in NHL history at 21 and is also the longest serving. Yzerman won a Conn Smythe in '98, three Stanley Cups, an Olympic gold medal, a World Cup and finished sixth in all-time

scoring. Stevie Y was a great competitor who battled back from serious injuries twice, represented Canada well and should be a first ballot Hall of Famer.

Also, in 2006, the F1 racing world bid farewell to its raining monarch, Michael Schumacher. Schumacher retires as the icon of his sport. He holds pretty much every racing record, including championships, poles, fastest laps and victories. He's also the first athlete to earn over a billion dollars and is credited with single-handedly making F1 popular in Germany.

### 3. KLASSEN GOLDEN FIVE TIMES OVER AT TORINO

The 20th Winter Olympics were held in Torino, Italy from 10-26 February. The Games featured 84 medal events that played out in front of empty seats, shoddy weather and some doping. Besides the entire Austrian ski team fleeing the games because of suspected illegal activity, Russian biathlon contestant Olga Pyleva was also stripped of her silver medal after testing positive for carphedon.

Luckily, the Canadian hockey team left their games on this side of the pond, Cindy Klassen snagged five gold medals and Canadian Female Athlete of the Year honors and Canada finished with 24 medal—good enough for third overall behind the Germans and Americans.

### 2. PAIN IN THE ASS: STEROIDS DEVALUING THE GAME

From Jason Gatlin to the book *Game of Shadows*, 2006 was a year covered in allegations of doping amongst athletes. The Winter Games in February were the start, shortly after Major League Baseball declared harsher penalties for illegal substances, with three strikes resulting in a year's suspension, Tour De France winner Floyd Landis tested positive for high testosterone levels in July and August, stand-out Pro Bowl defensive end

Shawne Merriman of the NFL's San Diego Chargers was also given a suspension for using a banned substance, and even the NHL has had rumours of athletes using performance-enhancing drugs. Ultimately, the cheating has resulted in the perception of athletes being transformed from role models to cheaters.

No one can look at spectacular sporting achievements anymore without wondering if the athlete may be juicing or popping or whatever Barry Bonds did to make his head grow eight sizes. Records are being called into question, medals and championships are being taken away and people are even going to jail. Whatever happened to just doing a little blow before big games? Hey, Mr Strawberry?

### 1. ITALIANS KICK THEIR WAY PAST HEAD-BANGING FRENCHMEN

The number one event of 2006 has to be the FIFA World Cup. Held in Germany from 9 June until 9 July, the most watched sport in the world took centre stage and delivered excitement across the globe. The '06 World Cup saw some traditional powerhouses return to prominence. While heavy favourite Brazil lost in the quarter-finals, France, Germany and Italy all made the semis—joined by Portugal—and Italy won for the fourth time. The Italy-France final was the first all-European final since 1982 and the first to end on penalties since 1994. This World Cup will be remembered for two things: the abnormally high amount of cards being handed out—an astonishing 373 total cards, which broke the record set back in 1990—and of course, “The header heard 'round the world.” Late in extra time of the Final, French captain and legend Zinedine Zidane lowered the boom on Italian Marco Materazzi with a headbutt to the chest after Materazzi insulted his sister. Zidane was sent off in disgrace and the French lost the match.

## TOP ATHLETES IN 2006

- Tiger Woods: After his father died in May and the first missed cut at a Major of his career, Tiger roared back to win the British Open and PGA Championship, and finished the season winning the last six events he entered.
- Vince Young: Starting the year by leading Texas to an upset in the Rose Bowl over USC, Young has continued to shine in 2006, winning eight games for Tennessee and being named the NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year.
- Sidney Crosby: Though he finished second for the Calder behind Alexander Ovechkin, “Sid the Kid” is currently leading the NHL in points. He's also raking in the dough from Gatorade, Reebok, Pepsi and Tim Horton's.