

# Lionel Pretoria Conacher

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Would it be heresy, hyperbole or honesty to refer to Jim Thorpe as the Lionel Conacher of the United States? Any attempt to compare these two athletes would be without purpose or merit. However, Canadian and American sportswriters in the 1920s delighted in such parallels in obvious efforts to add superlatives to Conacher's career.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the latter athlete was hailed as the "Jim Thorpe of Canada," but at least one American journalist was so impressed with Conacher's athletic prowess that he marshalled considerable evidence to refer to Lionel Conacher as the "world's greatest athlete."<sup>2</sup> Much more significant than attempts at comparing Conacher to Thorpe is the outstanding point of contrast between the two men. The name, Thorpe (even the sound of the word exudes the feeling of strength and power), is a household word, synonymous with athletic excellence, south and north of the forty-ninth parallel. The name, Conacher, is shrouded in the mysticism of the famous Toronto Maple Leaf "Kid Line"<sup>3</sup> and is fixed within the cloud of "cultural amnesia"<sup>4</sup> that envelops Canada's sporting and cultural heritage.

Scholarly research pertaining to the career of Lionel Pretoria<sup>5</sup> Conacher, gentleman, athlete, businessman and politician, is non-existent. This is incredible in view of the facts that the man excelled in sundry sports, at various levels of competition, between 1912 and 1937 and he was selected as "Canada's outstanding all-round male athlete of the half century"<sup>6</sup> in a 1950 Canadian Press poll. In an age of extreme specialization in sport, it is refreshing to examine the career of one of the last of these "all-round" athletes. Conacher was, as this paper will demonstrate, a sporting legend in his own lifetime—an eminent Canadian well worth meticulous study and analysis. Thus, the objectives of this study are to document and describe, as accurately as possible, Conacher's distinctive and distinguished athletic career and sporting achievements and to analyze the reasons for his success. In doing so it is hoped that Conacher's aforementioned selection as Canada's greatest male athlete of the first five decades of this century<sup>7</sup> can be more fully understood and appreciated.

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Nicknames rebounded from attempts to characterize Conacher's athletic excellence. He was most commonly referred to as the "Big Train,"<sup>8</sup> but his other labels in the press included the Blonde Express, Iroo Man, Athletic Superman, the Human Dynamo, Big Moose, Lion, Connie, Wonder Man of Canadian Athletics, Gargantuan Canuck, Canadian youth of herculean stature and even The Mastodonic Form. Size and power were the outstanding features of his competitive sport career. His physique he inherited from his father, Benjamin, a teamster and family-oriented man.<sup>9</sup> Attendance at Jesse Ketchum Public School, Toronto, and its surrounding park and athletic grounds, located in close proximity to the Conacher residence on Davenport Road, brought Conacher into a strong sporting environment. Winter and summer, young Lionel participated in any sport at Jesse Ketchum Park and Cottingham Square. From the outset, he was the acknowledged leader in playground sports, organizing the teams and dominating the games.<sup>10</sup> This early sporting opportunity was available to all of the Conacher children and probably accounts for the athletic success which Lionel and his brothers and sisters achieved.<sup>11</sup>

The start of an incredible maze of an organized sports career began with Conacher's play as a middle wing (tackle) in rugby football with the Toronto Capitals in 1912 when he was twelve years old. Lionel retired from competitive sport on April 23, 1937. The intervening twenty-five years were literally filled with athletic involvement and success. Table 1 represents an attempt to unravel and depict in chart form the very complex network<sup>12</sup> that Conacher wove in his athletic career. Those aspects of his profession—sport was Lionel's life—which are not readily apparent from a cursory examination of the Table are overlapping seasons, participatory involvement for more than one team in a single sport in one season, participation in as many as three senior level sports in one day, the number of games played and the number of championships won, his play in entire games of lacrosse, football and hockey, as well as the fact that between the Spring of 1931 and the Fall of 1933, Conacher excelled in no less than four professional sports—football, wrestling, lacrosse and hockey. Finally, it must be understood that Conacher's career was unique in that he enjoyed two peak periods—1920 to 1925 and 1930 to 1935—a decade apart!

### *Football—the Pattern is Established*

There can be no doubt that football was Conacher's favourite sport and that his superior ability in that athletic endeavour was well recognized. In 1927, the Toronto Star Weekly conducted a survey and distributed it to some fifty football coaches, sportswriters, referees and players. It was designed to pick the three greatest football players since the First World War and to select the greatest player of all time. Lionel Conacher was, by far, the top choice in both

selections.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-three years later, he was selected as Canada's greatest football player of the half-century in the 1950 Canadian Press poll.<sup>14</sup> His football prowess achieved legendary proportions. For example, Ron McAllister, sportscaster and sportswriter during the 1950s cited the following comment from a "veteran coach" who had been asked to pick an all-Canadian football squad:

Give me Lionel Conacher and Joe Wright Sr. when both were in their prime. Throw in ten Boy Scouts to hold their coats and make the team legal.<sup>15</sup>

Was such a reputation warranted? What was it that led to such public acclaim in one sport?

From 1912 to 1918 Conacher participated on four different teams as a middle wing. During that period, his teams won five city championships and one Junior Ontario Rugby Football Union Championship (see Table 1). Therefore, he either transferred his allegiance to the best team or else he was a contributing factor in his teams' successes.<sup>16</sup> In 1919, the manager of the Toronto Capitals, John "Nip" Dwan, moved Lionel to the halfback position.<sup>17</sup> For the next six years, Conacher enjoyed the football limelight. One sentence typifies the descriptions of Conacher's contributions as a halfback and as a fullback (with Bellefonte Academy and the Duquesne University Bluffites during the 1923 and 1924 seasons, respectively) as well as his approach to the game during these years: "He caught and he kicked and he ran and he bucked the entire sixty minutes."<sup>18</sup>

In retrospect, Sullivan described Conacher's style:

Without the aid of the forward pass, emphasis was on kicking, running the ends and plunging, and Conacher was good at all of them. Thousands of older fans have an unforgettable memory of Conacher—a peaked cap pulled down on his forehead and wearing old-fashioned short canvas football pants—galloping down a gridiron with his distinctive high knee action.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Conacher warranted his nickname, "Big Train," in football alone. He ran with the ball like a human locomotive. The pumping action of his knees cost one football player, Allan Arless of the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association, his life when Arless attempted to tackle Conacher.<sup>20</sup> In 1920, one sportswriter maintained that it would take ". . . a gallon of Lepages to stop his gallops."<sup>21</sup> Newspaper articles during the same year were replete with arguments about the merits of Harry Batstone versus Lionel Conacher as the best backfield player in football. By 1921, Conacher began to persuade the supporters of Batstone to change their views. In his first game with the Toronto Argonauts in September, 1921, Conacher scored 23 of the Argonauts 27 points and in doing so ". . . he had as much fun as a pickerel in a minnow pond."<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 1  
THE ATHLETIC CAREER OF LIONEL PRETORIA CONACHER  
1912-1937

Summer/ Fall of:	Hockey	Lacrosse	Baseball	Boxing	Wrestling
1912	Toronto Capitals 95 lb City champions				
1913	Toronto Capitals 115 lb City champions				
1914	Toronto Capitals 115 lb champions				
1915	Toronto Capitals 115 lb City champions MW		Toronto Maitland Juveniles		Toronto Central Y.M.C.A. welter- weight
1916	Toronto Beaches (broken collar bone)	Toronto Century Rovers - midget	Toronto Maitland Juniors H		Amateur light- weight champion- ship of Ontario
1917	Toronto Arlingtons City Senior champions MW	Aura Lee Juniors	Toronto Maitland Juniors H	Elizabeth Intermediate Senior City Playground League	
1918	Toronto Central Y.M.C.A. O.R.F.U. junior champions MW	Aura Lee Juniors O.H.A. finalists D	Toronto Maitland Juniors H	Toronto Hillcrest C & O	
1919	Toronto Capitals Intermediate O.R.F.U. champions HB	Toronto Canoe Club Junior O.H.A. & Canadian champions (Memorial Cup) & Dominion Bank national champions D	Dominion Intermediate H	Simcoes in Riverdale C Senior League & Dominion Bank in Civil Service League C & O	

1920	Toronto Rugby Club HB Senior O.R.F.U. champions	Aura Lee Seniors - S.P.A. Trophy & Dominion Bank D	Toronto Maitland Seniors H	Simcoes in Riverdale Senior League C & O	Canadian light heavy weight boxing champion and finalist in heavy- weight class
1921	Toronto Argonauts Interprovincial and Canadian (Grey Cup) champions HB	Aura Lee O.H.A. senior finalists & Dominion Bank national championships D	Toronto Maitland Seniors H	Toronto Hillcrests City and Ontario Senior champions O	
1922	Toronto Argonauts Interprovincial champions HB	North Toronto O.H.A. Intermediate semi-finalists	Riverside Senior H	Toronto Hillcrests City Senior champions	Four round exhi- bition with Jack Dempsey (Christie Hospital benefit)
1923	Bellefonte Academy FB	Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets Senior U.S.A.H.A. champions D	Toronto Maitland Seniors H	Toronto Hillcrests P & O	
1924	Duquesne University Bluffites FB	Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets Senior U.S.A.H.A. champions D	Toronto Irish Canadians & Toronto Maitland Seniors H		
1925		Pittsburgh Pirates N.H.L. Stanley Cup playoffs D	Toronto Irish Canadians H		
1926		Pittsburgh Pirates & New York Americans D NHL	*No record that Conacher was ever a member of a championship lacrosse team	Toronto Maple Leafs International Profes- sional Baseball League championship & Little World Series champion ships O	
1927	Coached (assistant) football at Rutgers University	New York Americans D NHL			

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Summer/ Fall of:	Football	Hockey	Lacrosse	Baseball	Boxing	Wrestling
1928		New York Americans D NHL				
1929		New York Americans Stanley Cup playoffs D NHL				
1930		Montreal Maroons D NHL				
1931		Montreal Maroons D NHL	Montreal Maroons Inter- national Indoor Professional Lacrosse League (107 goals)			
1932		Montreal Maroons D NHL				Professional international wrestler, 26 victories, no losses
1933	Crosse and Blackwell Chefs professionals, international football HB	Chicago Black Hawks Stanley Cup champions D NHL				

1934	Wrigley Aromints professional inter- national football HB	Montreal Maroons Stanley Cup champions D
1935		Montreal Maroons D NHL
1936		Montreal Maroons D NHL
1937		(Retired: April 23, 1937)

Sources: Newspapers of the period; periodical literature; scrapbooks; interviews.

Legend:

MW	-	middle wing
HB	-	halfback
FB	-	fullback
O.R.F.U.	-	Ontario Rugby Football Union
D	-	defense
H	-	home
C	-	catcher
O	-	outfielder
P	-	pitcher
O.H.A.	-	Ontario Hockey Association
N.H.L.	-	National Hockey League
S.P.A.	-	Sportsmen's Patriotic Association
U.S.A.H.A.	-	United States Amateur Hockey Association

Lou Marsh, the famous sportswriter for the Toronto Daily Star,<sup>23</sup> reported his views of a 1922 Hamilton Tigers-Toronto Argonaut confrontation in Hamilton:

Lionel Conacher is the superman of Canadian football and he stood out like a red vest at a funeral. . . . He dodged and side-stepped tacklers by the score—for every Tiger wanted to get the croix de rugby for stopping the mightiest gridiron warrior in the broad Dominion.<sup>24</sup>

It seemed that everyone was impressed to the limit with Conacher's superiority on the football field. Even Deacon White, coach of the Edmonton Eskimos, while scouting the 1921 Argonauts—Parkdale Canoe Club Canadian Rugby Union semi-final, could not help but marvel at the Big Train's power and skill.<sup>25</sup> White's comments were prophetic. In the first East-West Grey Cup final, in which White's Eskimos team was the Western representative, Conacher dominated the Argonauts defense in kicking and punt returns and fifteen of the "double blue's" twenty-three points were scored by Conacher.<sup>26</sup> It was an appropriate end to the 1921 football season in which Conacher was featured as the major factor in every Argonaut victory!<sup>27</sup> His football scoring feats are accentuated when one realizes that there was no blocking to assist the ball carrier in Canadian football at that point in time and no forward pass threat to spread the defense.

The inevitable move to the United States to pursue football as a career—senior "amateur" football was the apex of the Canadian football system in the 1920s—occurred at the end of the summer in 1923.<sup>28</sup> The idea that promoters entertained was to

. . . somehow shoe-horn him into a Pennsylvania University where he could play amateur football on a scholarship. But Conacher's big knees fitted ill under a school desk. . . .<sup>29</sup>

As a result, Lionel, who was deficient in several high school subjects, was enrolled at Bellefonte Academy, near Pittsburgh. Bellefonte was a college preparatory school and as such, Conacher's enrollment in the institution at twenty-three years of age would have meant that he was four years senior to the oldest boys in the Academy.

Bellefonte was only a small academic institution and its football team competed with schools of similar size as well as with freshman teams from major universities. But the pattern of Conacher's football prowess was not interrupted. By early November 1923, he was the star of the team, destined, as one Toronto reporter quipped, ". . . to graduate as a B.A., Ph.D., LL.D. of Yankee football."<sup>30</sup> In the previous month he was reported to be "booting the ball a mile"<sup>31</sup> and to have scored four touchdowns against St. Francis College and two touchdowns against Bucknell.<sup>32</sup> Obviously, Conacher's age and football experience gave him a decided advantage. Following a minor automobile

accident in 1924, Lionel played football for the Duquesne University Bluffites and exemplified his prowess in a Tri-State, class B league.<sup>33</sup>

The one individual that would have been most competent to assess Conacher's ability in American football would be a former coach. Carl Snavelly, football coach at the Bellefonte prep school during Lionel's tenure at that institution, stated:

Conacher, by the way, was probably the greatest athlete that I have ever coached in football or in any other form of athletics. . . I don't believe I ever had a fullback who was a better runner in an open field, or who was a better punter, or who so fully possessed all of the qualities of speed, skill, dexterity, aggressiveness, self control, and the various attributes that are required for superiority in the American game of football. . .<sup>34</sup>

It would seem accurate to state that Lionel Conacher was the best half-back/fullback in every football league in which he played between 1919 and 1924 inclusive. His virtuosity as a running back was complemented by his talent as a kicker. Over 6,000 fans witnessed a football travel eight-five yards in the air from the impact of Conacher's foot.<sup>35</sup> This feat is not comparable to the length of punts made in contemporary football since the ball in the 1920s was lighter and more inflated.

Conacher ended his career as an amateur football player in the Fall of 1925 by signing a National Hockey League contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates franchise.<sup>36</sup> Hockey stardom brought him into a new social atmosphere and, eventually, alcoholism. His brother, Charlie, stated: "For a time it seemed he was bent on a literal interpretation of the soft-drink slogan, Drink Canada Dry."<sup>37</sup> Out of sheer determination<sup>38</sup> to do so, Conacher quit drinking in 1930 and never took another drink in his life. His resolution to quit drinking paralleled his athletic will to win. Andy O'Brien recalled: "I used to watch him drink nine cokes and eat a box of chocolates before going to bed—but he licked the craving."<sup>39</sup> There followed one of the most amazing—there is no better adjective—comebacks in the history of sport. Football was one part of that athletic resurgence.

Almost ten years after his last competitive game of football, and at thirty-three years of age, Conacher organized the first professional football league in Canada and captained one of its teams, the Crosse and Blackwell Chefs. The Crosse and Blackwell firm was a British-Canadian food products company. Conacher signed an agreement to "promote and play for. . .the first outright professional football team ever to be recruited in this country."<sup>41</sup> Games that attracted between 4,000 and 13,000 fans were played against Rochester and Buffalo, with the Chefs using Maple Leaf Stadium as their home grounds.<sup>42</sup> In a fashion characteristic of a decade earlier, Conacher dominated the play in and the press coverage for every game that season.

Business firms must have been attracted to the advertising potential of professional team sponsorship. The 1934 football season witnessed Conacher playing professional football for the Wrigley Aromints.<sup>43</sup> The only change from the 1933 league was the name of Conacher's Club. His personal, athletic preeminence remained, likewise, consistent. So popular was he in the Toronto area because of his football skills, that the *Toronto Telegram* hired him in the Fall of 1934 to write instructional football articles directed toward high school football players. For every article written, Conacher would visit a particular high school, during football practice, to give coaching assistance<sup>44</sup> and, undoubtedly, inspiration from his personal reputation and physical presence. At the end of the 1934 football campaign, a season sandwiched between two successive Stanley Cup victories (see Table I), Conacher permanently retired his size eleven cleats.

### *Hockey, Lacrosse and Baseball—The Archetype is Proliferated and Promoted*

To Lionel Conacher, sport was a way of life and football was his favourite sport. However, during the 1920s in Canada, there was no vocational future in the game. In contrast, professional hockey was increasing in popularity and opportunity for the skilled athlete. In 1925 and 1926, the N.H.L. underwent considerable expansion and ended up with ten teams.<sup>45</sup> It was no accident that Conacher was one of the players so skillfully, and willingly, engineered in this evolutionary process.

Magazine and press accounts pertaining to Conacher's career, seemed to delight in the notion that Lionel never skated until he was sixteen.<sup>46</sup> In point of fact, 1916-1917 was Conacher's first year of involvement in organized hockey (see Table I). He learned to skate, according to his sister, as a young boy,<sup>47</sup> on the rink at Jesse Ketchum Park, Toronto. He did not attract attention in the press until the 1919-1920 season as a member of the Canadian junior championship (Memorial Cup) Toronto Canoe Club (T.C.C.) team. In one game, prior to that victory, Conacher " . . . played grand hockey for the winners. . . and got two goals on magnificent rushes."<sup>48</sup> After the T.C.C. juniors won the Ontario Hockey Association series, the team played a Shelburne junior team. The Canoe Club team won 31-3 with Conacher scoring eight goals for his team and one goal, in an interpreted act of sportsmanship, for the other team.<sup>49</sup> The margin of victory in that game combined with the championship attainment of the Toronto team is certainly indicative of a recurring characteristic throughout Conacher's competitive sports career, videlicet he played on carefully selected and well coached teams.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Lionel was also distinctively conspicuous, even on championship teams. For example, in the Fall of 1920, the Toronto St. Patrick's professional hockey club offered him 3,000 dollars to play for the team.<sup>51</sup> Conacher declined the proposition. As will be documented below, Conacher was an athletic plum in 1920,

primarily in football, lacrosse, hockey and baseball. Why at twenty years of age, with his high school education incomplete and no trade to rely upon, would he have turned down such a lucrative offer? To answer these questions it is necessary to examine and analyze Conacher's business and total athletic circumstances during the early 1920s.

Perhaps Lionel felt his future was in football at the time of the St. Pat's offer. It is more likely that he was quite satisfied with his situation in 1920. Had he signed with professional hockey, he would have been eliminated from all participation in amateur sport at a time when he was just reaching his athletic peak in all sports. For example, in the Spring of 1920, he had won the Canadian amateur lighthweight boxing title in Ottawa.<sup>52</sup> As was shown in the preceding section, his 1920 football season was most successful in drawing attention to Conacher. With specific reference to lacrosse in the same year, he

. . . smashed all records for a season's play by taking part in junior, intermediate and senior games, playing as many as two games on a Saturday afternoon. . . and earned the reputation of being one of the greatest home field players ever developed on Cottingham Square.<sup>53</sup>

In his spare time during 1920, he played baseball for the Simcoes senior baseball team: "His work as a catcher along with his ability to hit stamps him as a coming star behind the bat."<sup>54</sup> Finally, he was both employed by and played hockey for the Toronto Dominion Bank. Conacher's team won the Bogert Cup, representative of Canadian supremacy in the nation's commercial bank hockey leagues, at the end of the 1919-1920 hockey season.<sup>55</sup>

Conacher was immersed in a sport system, during the early 1920s, which he dominated. The chance to become a well paid professional hockey player came to him on another occasion from Leo Dandurand, manager of the Montreal Canadiens, in 1922. The Canadiens tendered Conacher 5,000 dollars plus ". . .an offer to establish Conacher in business in Montreal."<sup>56</sup> Once again, he declined. By the time of the Montreal offer, Conacher had worked for two years at the Toronto Dominion bank. In addition

. . . a clothing man conceived the idea of hiring Conacher, and his co-star in hockey, Billy Burch, to handle a readymade clothing store for him in Yonge Street, Toronto. He offered them good salaries for the use of their names over the door—that was practically what it amounted to—and their services as joint managers of the place.<sup>57</sup>

This undertaking in 1921 flourished for a few months until the novelty dissipated. But Conacher and his Aura Lee teammate, Burch, incorporated the idea to establish a "Cleaning, Dyeing and Pressing" business in Bloor Street, Toronto.<sup>58</sup> Even though Conacher was unable to manage the store properly because of his athletic commitments,<sup>59</sup> the store remained in operation, for over two years, until he moved to Pittsburgh in 1923. Thus, Conacher was not

lacking in financial income at the time of the professional hockey contract offers.

When news spread that Conacher was able to turn down such lucrative professional sporting inducements, accusations mounted concerning his amateur status. He and Burch had been accused of fixing the point spread after the Aura Lee Senior team edged past Kichener 6-5 to win the Sportsmen's Patriotic Association trophy<sup>60</sup> in the 1920-1921 hockey season. Because the two athletes had played so poorly in what was expected to be an easy victory, the complaints of possible financial inducement arose. The following season, the same club, Conacher and Burch in particular, was openly charged with involvement in betting and gambling on hockey games.<sup>61</sup> The Ontario branch of the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada suspended all the players and officials of the Aura Lee hockey club on "serious charges of infringement of amateurism."<sup>62</sup> After investigation, the national amateur body "spilt the pot of whitewash"<sup>63</sup> over the team. But the spectre of alleged profiteering in amateur sport haunted Conacher to the end of the 1922 football season. In the Canadian Rugby Union semi-final, Conacher, playing for the Argonauts against Queen's University, fumbled seven times in his "poorest showing ever."<sup>64</sup> After the Argonaut defeat, Toronto papers implied that Conacher had "sold out."<sup>65</sup> Nothing came of this latter denunciation. Conacher's sensitivity to the professional allegations in 1922 combined with a probable interest in redeeming himself to the Toronto public, led him to retreat not only from the Aura Lees to a new team, but also back to intermediate level hockey during the 1922-1923 season (see Table I).

Whether Conacher was in any way involved in the aforementioned scandals is pure speculation. It is the writer's personal interpretation that Conacher was making quite enough money through private business (the bank and his cleaning and pressing and clothing firms) as well as within the letter of the amateur law. In addition, a certain Mr. Harris Ardiel had befriended Lionel:

If any wealthy man takes a fancy to "adopt" a star athlete as his particular protege and put him through college and give him a real chance in life, why should that make him [the athlete] a pro? Does such generosity, no matter what object the generous patron has north of his eyebrows, make the recipient an outlaw? <sup>66</sup>

The author of those questions, Lou Marsh, journalist and hockey referee of considerable reputation in both fields, claimed that Conacher " . . . was catered to and fawned upon by men of considerable prominence in business and professional life."<sup>67</sup> Mr. Harris Ardiel, a Toronto banker, took an interest in Lionel sometime before 1920 and within three years was known as Conacher's "guide, counsellor and friend."<sup>68</sup> He was best man at Conacher's wedding on September 17, 1923<sup>69</sup> and, more germane to this study, he was intricately involved in several sport clubs for which Conacher played.

In 1921, Ardiel was an official in the Toronto Argonaut Football organization,<sup>70</sup> the same year Lionel led the Argos to a Grey Cup victory. By 1923, Mr. Ardiel had become president of the Hillcrest Athletic Club,<sup>71</sup> for whom Conacher had played baseball in 1918 and 1921 through 1923. In addition, the former individual was president and manager of the Toronto Maitlands lacrosse organization,<sup>72</sup> for whom Conacher played for eight years between 1915 and 1925. Both positions with the Hillcrests and Maitlands suggest some previous involvement in a capacity other than as president, although the writer could find no supporting evidence for this assumption. When the Montreal Canadiens sought Conacher, again, in 1924, Dandurand dealt through Harris Ardiel.<sup>73</sup> Thus, Ardiel, it may be hypothesized, was Conacher's friend and athletic manager in three of his most prominent sports. Ardiel must be viewed, as a significant influence upon Conacher's career.

Yet even Harris Ardiel was unable to harness and control the enigma that Conacher had become in his multifaceted, tremendously successful athletic career during the early 1920s. Just as with football, his express-like style and strategy in lacrosse and, in lesser fashion in hockey, aptly demonstrated the reason for the cognomen, "Big Train." In hockey, when he first started to play, Conacher " . . . simply crashed through . . . " opposing players and blasted his shot at the goalkeeper.<sup>74</sup> But by 1922, he was cited as being a senior star in the Ontario Hockey Association and possessing an excellent poke check, as a defenseman, and a "wicked shot . . . [that is] always dead on for the corner."<sup>75</sup> The interesting feature of his hockey career to this point, was the lack of press attention to him in hockey.<sup>76</sup> Although he was earning somewhat of a reputation as a "second goaltender" or "travelling netminder,"<sup>77</sup> it is ironic that sportswriters were not impressed, apparently, with the sport that became his main profession between 1925 and 1937. Possibly, his position as a defenseman did not lend itself to the spotlight of hockey interest in scoring goals. For whatever reason, or combination of reasons, he just was not a spectacular hockey player. Instead, his size and physical propensity for body contact kept him from his more familiar position as an attacker as he was in football and lacrosse.

In hockey, Conacher could rush with the puck occasionally, but he could not pick it up and bolster his way through the other team. That was his real disadvantage in the winter sport. But lacrosse, halfway between hockey and football in nature, was the sport that truly accentuated his athletic talents. Playing in the "home" or forward position he "invented and polished . . . the half-back play"<sup>78</sup> in lacrosse using "swerving steam roller rushes."<sup>79</sup> Conacher pressed his stick, cradling the ball, against his body and ploughed through the defense. By 1923, he had perfected the technique, as is exemplified in the following account:

. . . when he starts one of his rushes with a half turn that is reminiscent of the football field, and

sets out under full steam one big arm extended protectingly in a swerving dash for the goal . . . the result is sensational. 80

Lacrosse teams tried everything to stop him. They double-teamed him, triple-teamed him and advocated that a fresh man be put on him every quarter,<sup>81</sup> but to no avail. The press selected Conacher to an all-star lacrosse team in October, 1922,<sup>82</sup> but no one knew quite what to make of his style or where to categorize his aptitude for the sport. Yet Joe Lally, in 1921, was able to proclaim that Conacher “. . . was greater than Henry Hoobin”<sup>83</sup> and the public press could confirm that “. . . without a doubt [Conacher was] the greatest lacrosse player in the game.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the evolutionary process toward becoming such a dominant figure in lacrosse was exactly the same as in football. That is, he first became prominent in the game in the 1920 season. By 1923, for a league lacrosse game early in the season, the newspaper advertisement read:

CONACHER  
Canada's Greatest Athlete  
Will Play in The  
RIVERSIDES V. MAITLANDS  
Lacrosse Game - Scarboro  
Beach  
SATURDAY, 3:15 p.m.  
Rain or Shine

He was the gate attraction, the stellar performer—just as he was in football.

Dramatically and historically, Conacher was and is remembered for his knack of fusing an outstanding performance in lacrosse with another in baseball on the same day. Termed as the “Iron Man stunt,” Conacher, playing for the Hillcrests baseball team in June, 1921, hit a double to center field in the bottom of the last inning with the bases loaded and his team down one run. He then called a taxi and proceeded to Scarborough Beach and joined his lacrosse team, the Maitlands, at half time. Down 2-1 when Conacher arrived, the Maitlands won with a final score of 3-2 with Conacher scoring both goals in the fourth quarter.<sup>85</sup> Memory and legend have distorted the incident to extremes of having Conacher steal several bases on an overthrow as well as crediting him with four goals and an assist in a 5-4 lacrosse victory.<sup>86</sup> However, the example serves to illustrate that baseball was part and parcel of Lionel’s evolution toward being a most attractive sporting commodity in Canada, and more significantly, in the United States by 1923.

Conacher’s penchant for playing central positions in sport was exhibited in baseball in his early efforts to be a pitcher and/or catcher. The earliest record of his organized baseball career dates to 1917 when played with the “Elizabeth Intermediates” in the City Playground League. However, most of his

baseball career was played as an outfielder, normally right field, and as a left handed batter for the Hillcrest Athletic Club. His pitching career was scattered over his playing years, although he still played the position just before he went to the United States.<sup>87</sup> However, he was best known, unlike his nicknamesake Walter Johnson, as a “slugger” at bat. In Merriwellian fashion, he was responsible for winning games at the eleventh hour through effective hitting.<sup>88</sup> In fact, by 1922, rumors abounded about his “mighty bat,” one that was loaned to him by a former, prominent baseball player, Harry Downing:

It is a fine piece of timber—and envied by all the players. Since ‘Conny’ started to swing it he has done some heavy slugging and he looks after the piece of hardwood like a mother watches her babe. 89

Therefore, even in baseball, possibly the weakest of his sports, Conacher was achieving legendary proportions. In July of the same year, Conacher was reported to be batting .400.<sup>90</sup> Yet the writer, in examining press accounts of Conacher’s baseball career, never found one compliment about his ability as either a catcher or an outfielder. Perhaps Conacher favoured football and lacrosse, and with the obvious baseball season overlap with those two sports, he was unable to refine his defensive skills in baseball. Despite Conacher’s lack of fielding skills, he was viewed by several baseball clubs as skilled enough at batting and/or as a prime gate attraction to warrant professional overtures.

The Toronto Maple Leafs tried for over a year to sign Conacher to a professional contract in the International League,<sup>91</sup> but the organization was not successful in doing so. The rumours of the Leafs-Conacher negotiations led to similar solicitations, including those from the Detroit Tigers and the Baltimore franchise.<sup>92</sup> But and this is the critical feature of his baseball prowess in the perspective of his total career, the offers were sight unseen. Conacher’s reputation and potential as a drawing card were the major aspects of his attractiveness to professional baseball. Consider the actual letter sent to Lionel on May 10, 1922, from Edward Holly, a scout for the Boston Red Sox:

Through a friend I learned that you were thinking of playing prof. baseball. If this is true I am in a position to get you a job in professional ball. Will be glad to have you let me know what position you play and when and where you play your games, also the salary you would consider per month. Will appreciate an early reply to 223 William St., Williamsport, Penna.<sup>93</sup>

Although Conacher must have been flattered by such offers, he also must have realized he was at the pinnacle of his athletic career in a variety of sports. He did, finally, accept an offer from the Leafs to play as a professional in the International Baseball League in 1926.<sup>94</sup> The team won the league championship and the Little World Series, but Conacher only played

in three games. (It is the writer's belief that Conacher signed the baseball contract out of dissatisfaction in his first year of professional hockey with the management of the Pittsburgh Pirates franchise. (See, *infra*, p. 24). At the time of the professional baseball propositions in 1921 and 1922, Conacher was only twenty-one years old, was doing well in business and amateur sport and he was being counselled by Harris Ardiel. Only one prospect, it seems, could have overcome the Big Train's inertia with respect to professional sport—the prospect of a career in football.

At the end of such a process, the choice would be Conacher's—professional football, business or both. These ideas, or a similar “train” of thought, must have been in Lionel's mind as he left for Pittsburgh on September 17, 1923. But the interaction of character and circumstances together with the machinations of men with other ideas were to switch the Big Train to a different track.

After a year of countering accusations about his amateur status, Conacher was, at least mentally, ready for a change in venue. The prospect of a university education probably had attracted Conacher to Pittsburgh. But his potential as a gate attraction had been tested by a transplanted Torontonian, Roy Schooley. Schooley was perceptive in noting that Conacher was the main feature at hockey games in Canada, even when he merely refereed the games! For example, a Kingston, Ontario, paper, on February 22, 1923, raved about the fact that Conacher would be in the city in a few days to referee a game between the Frontenacs and Queen's University.<sup>95</sup> Schooley, who was manager of the Duquesne Gardens, “the largest and most beautiful skating palace in the world,”<sup>96</sup> in Pittsburgh, and who also happened to be secretary of the United States Amateur Hockey Association, invited Conacher in late February, 1923, to referee two games in his Gardens “to see if the crowd would take to him.”<sup>97</sup> As a further test, Schooley asked Conacher to play with the Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets in a four game series against his former teammates, and the Aura Lee hockey team, and against the Hamilton-Tigers. To put it mildly, Conacher impressed the Pittsburgh fans by scoring eleven of the Yellow Jacket's twenty-three goals in the four games.<sup>98</sup> Schooley even wrote an article, for the Pittsburgh press, outlining Lionel's impressive career, just prior to the first game that Conacher refereed in “Smoke City.”<sup>99</sup> Quite literally, Conacher's talents were sold to the public through promotion.

After his football season at Bellefonte Academy, Conacher was appointed captain of the Yellow Jackets hockey team—a team composed entirely of Canadians.<sup>100</sup> By January, this Pittsburgh, amateur team was on the road for ten days at a time. If Conacher was still in full attendance at Bellefonte, this

kind of time commitment must have been a deterrent to his academic career. Fortunately, he suffered no financial worries:

In his spare time in Pittsburgh he is an insurance agent and his commissions from that source are large, so it is said. Some of his prospects are gilt-edged ones, too, lined up beforehand by somebody else. There are more ways of licking up the soup than supplying it out of a saucer.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, the city had changed, but nothing else. Conacher was as well cared for and catered to by Schooley and the insurance firm as he had been by Ardiel and the Toronto Dominion bank.

In performance he was just as true to form. In his opening game at Duquesne, Conacher scored a hat trick.<sup>102</sup> The Yellow Jackets' foremost opposition in the U.S.A.H.A. was the Boston Athletic Association hockey club. A Boston newspaper, the *Boston Traveller*, January 29, 1924, termed the Pittsburgh club "a wonder team" and another account referred to Conacher as "Canada's Wonder Athlete" when he first played in that city.<sup>103</sup> In the final game of the regular season play, a Pittsburgh paper exclaimed:

The clatter of sticks, the clash of flying blades, a dazzling, all-pervading cloud of Gold, and over all, predominating the scene, the very air electric with the magic of his personality, Conacher—Lionel Conacher—Pittsburgh's mighty man of valor.<sup>104</sup>

And by March—could the football and lacrosse pattern be repeated any more accurately if it had been planned—opponents of the Yellow Jackets were trying to devise strategies aimed at stopping Conacher (he had twenty-eight goals in twenty-nine regular season games.)<sup>105</sup> Moreover, along with Roger Smith, at the other defensive position, and Roy Worters, in goal, Conacher was part of Pittsburgh's "stonewall defense."<sup>106</sup> During the semi-final series with Cleveland, Conacher was elevated to the level of legend:

. . . weighted down by responsibility and the knowledge that victory must come now or never, Conacher, like Hector of old, like Thor, the thundergod of Viking saga, bore up 'neath all to smite the enemy with crashing blow. . . . Thrice did Lionel crack asunder that steely cordon Cleveland throws about her goal. . . — and thrice did full 6,000 fans rise up in roaring tribute to the man who in four brief months had become their idol.<sup>107</sup>

Even in Cleveland, Conacher was ". . . the cat's pajamas with all the fans."<sup>108</sup>

Suffice to say that his two years with the Yellow Jackets were extremely successful. Both years, Pittsburgh won the Fellowes Cup, symbolic of U.S.A.H.A. supremacy. Throughout the two hockey seasons, Conacher's picture was frequently displayed in Pittsburgh papers. He was highly promoted and was obviously leader of the team. On November 11, 1925, Co-

nacher signed his first professional contract.<sup>109</sup> The entire, Yellow Jackets team became professional with almost a total overlap in the player roster from the 1924-1925 season to that of 1925-1926. Intimations were such that Conacher was to be player/manager of the new N.H.L. franchise.<sup>110</sup> However, Conacher was overlooked in favour of Odie Cleghom, the only new recruit to the professional Pittsburgh team. Lionel could not forget this act—one which he felt was unjust.

The Pirates won their first game, against an older N.H.L. franchise, the Boston Bruins, and Conacher scored the team's first goal.<sup>111</sup> For about a month and a half, Conacher's praises were characteristically featured in the press. However, by the end of the season, his play deteriorated considerably and it was rumoured that the reason stemmed from Conacher's inability to cooperate with Cleghom.<sup>112</sup> In mid December, 1926, he was traded to the New York Americans for Charlie Langlois.<sup>113</sup> The attractions to New York were at least two in number. Newsy Lalonde, one of Canada's foremost lacrosse and hockey players, was the Americans' coach and Billy Burch, Conacher's former teammate and business partner in Toronto, was one of the team's best players.

Once in New York, Conacher was again performing "brilliant rushes [and playing] a wonderful defense game."<sup>114</sup> In less than a month, the Conacher legend began to infect New York in newspaper promotion:

Red Green tells us that the local rivalry was at such a high pitch preceding the American-Ranger clash that Conacher's police dog, 'Tarzan,' refused a plank steak in the Forrest Hotel dining room just because three members of the Garden's team were seated at a nearby table.<sup>115</sup>

The constant praises echoed by the press throughout Conacher's career seemed to be warranted by the "Big Train's" dominance of sporting contests. At this particular point of his career, his defensive play was the feature of the 1926- 1927 season with the Americans, but by the end of his years with New York, Lionel had begun to enjoy the social life of New York and had become an alcoholic. With the exception of a brief description of his career in *The Official Metropolitan Guide*, February 6, 1930, New York, the accolades became rare in his last two seasons with the Americans. Before the 1930- 1931 season, he was traded to the Maroons<sup>116</sup> at a time when most people must have felt his career was at an end.

### *The Comeback*

Conacher made a dramatic change in his approach to professional athletics. His efforts in organizing and playing in professional football have already been described. When lacrosse made a last effort to attract spectators in 1931 with indoor, or box lacrosse, Conacher joined the Montreal Maroons la-

crosse team in the Indoor Professional Lacrosse League. Playing the “attacker” or forward position, he dominated lacrosse games during that season, often scoring five or six goals per game with “. . . tricky stickhandling and lusty defense-crashing tactics.”<sup>117</sup> Conacher led the four team league in scoring and was, once again, the object of opposing teams’ defensive strategies. That lacrosse season was the end of Lionel’s lacrosse playing days, but it represented the initial impetus to his athletic resurgence. As a side-delight, it should be pointed out that in the 1950 Canadian Press poll, Conacher received some votes as the greatest lacrosse player of the first half century,<sup>119</sup> a definite tribute to his prowess in the sport. His oldest son, Lionel Jr., recalled that his father was gracious in accepting his two top honours in the Canadian Press poll. However, when Edward Cyril (“Newsy”) Lalonde was selected as the greatest lacrosse player, Lionel Jr.’s father said that he felt he could “run circles around Newsy Lalonde in lacrosse.”<sup>120</sup> Obviously, then, Conacher himself had a high regard for his own lacrosse prowess.

At the end of the 1931 lacrosse season, Conacher attached himself or was attached to another professional sport promoter, Ivan Michailoff. The sport was wrestling, an event not unknown to Conacher. He had learned to wrestle in his Y.M.C.A. days, as a teenager, and had won the Ontario amateur lightweight wrestling championship in London, Ontario, in 1916.<sup>121</sup> On November 2, 1931, Conacher signed a professional wrestling contract with the sport’s promoter Ivan Michailoff.<sup>122</sup> In all probability, Conacher was using the wrestling contract as leverage to induce the Maroons hockey team to increase his salary,<sup>123</sup> or as an opportunity to supplement his income. It is the writer’s belief that he intended to reap the promotional benefits of favourable press reports and, thereby, to enhance his reputation in athletics. It was a three year agreement in which Conacher was to receive 7,000 dollars the first year, 10,000 dollars the next and 15,000 dollars the third year.<sup>124</sup> As it turned out, he did not wrestle his first bout until May, 1932,<sup>125</sup> and he only wrestled some twenty-six fights, retiring at the end of the summer.

He approached the sport in very predictable fashion. That is, he literally rammed himself at his opponents with “flying tackles, flying scissors and flying flops [before 4,000 people who] paid to laugh—and boo. Yep, they cheered too—some of them—sometimes.”<sup>126</sup> In his first fight, against Carl Pospeshil “. . . Conny left his feet and hit him like a Rocky mountain goat going into action in one of those spring tournaments.”<sup>127</sup> At almost thirty-two years of age, Conacher was back in characteristic form and back in the sport spotlight. On one occasion, after a wrestling match in June at the Mutual Street Arena, he received a standing ovation when he left the ring.<sup>128</sup>

Thus, by the Fall of 1933, Lionel Conacher had reverted to his athletic style of

the early 1920s through three sports, namely, box lacrosse, wrestling and football—all at the professional level. In professional hockey his comeback was not as dramatic, statistically speaking, as in the other sports. He became one of the finest defencemen in the league; a fact that is borne out by his selection to the second N.H.L. all-star team at the end of the 1932- 1933 hockey campaign and again at the end of his last season in professional hockey, 1936-1937.<sup>129</sup> He was a member of back-to-back Stanley Cup winning teams: Chicago Black Hawks, 1933-1934 and Montreal Maroons, 1934-1935. While with the Black Hawks, he was selected to the N.H.L. first all-star team and Conacher's fan appeal was reminiscent of one decade earlier:

Judging by Sunday's radio broadcast, Lionel 'Big Train' Conacher is Chicago's popular hero. Every time Conny stopped an American or made a rush the huge audience cut loose with a salvo that made the old mike ring like a tin pan going down a cobble-paved street in a November gale.<sup>130</sup>

He became sensitive about his age and let on to the press that he was two years younger than he actually was (even at his death in 1954, many newspapers gave his age as fifty-two). He retired from all professional sport, specifically hockey, on April 23, 1937, with 80 goals and 105 assists to his career credit in twelve years of professional hockey.<sup>131</sup> He had also acquired over 860 penalty minutes.<sup>132</sup> the equivalent of fourteen full hockey games, yet he never had the reputation of being an aggressive or violent player during his N.H.L. career.

Following his retirement, and periodically over the next seventeen years, Conacher played benefit lacrosse, baseball and hockey games, the latter with the N.H.L. oldtimers.<sup>133</sup> His death occurred during a Members of Parliament-press gallery softball game. Because of his age and his reputation as a fit athlete, his death received front page headlines in the *Ottawa Citizen*, May 27, 1954.<sup>134</sup> He had made his money in the stock market before and after his athletic career ended. He became "general manager of Davenport Traders of Toronto,"<sup>135</sup> was elected, as a Liberal, to provincial parliament from 1937 to 1943 and to federal parliament between 1949 and the date of his death. But the man with "Pop-Eye-like biceps"<sup>136</sup> and the nose "with three hairpin turns"<sup>137</sup> was an athlete, Canada's foremost athlete between 1900 and 1950.

### *Conclusions—The Reasons for Conacher's Success*

The preceding sections have documented and delineated the athletic career and sporting achievements of Lionel Pretoria Conacher. While there are no reliable, written records to verify the claims, Conacher was often described as being a competent swimmer, oarsman, sprinter and discus thrower. However, the evidence accumulated and recorded above is sufficient to substantiate the fact that Conacher was a remarkably diversified and talented athlete. Why was he so good at so many sports? The purpose of this section of the paper is

to attempt to synthesize the facts about his athletic career in order to analyze the reasons for his success.

Obviously, there is no one single factor that was the secret of his successful career. It was a combination of several factors that interacted to make Lionel Conacher the phenomenal athlete that he was. First and foremost was his size. In all of the sports described above, it is evident that Conacher was regarded as a big man. At six feet, one inch and weighing between 185 and 200 pounds in his prime, he tended to dominate games and impress reporters with his powerful physique. Whether it was flying tackles in wrestling, rink-long rushes in hockey, bucking the line and end rushes with the football tucked under one arm or cradling the lacrosse ball against his body and plunging toward the goal, Conacher used his body as an offensive, and even as a defensive weapon. As a consequence of his ability to use his size to its fullest advantage, he often became the key to his opponents' defensive system. That is, he was double-teamed or isolated for specific man-on-man coverage. Even under those circumstances, his rivals quipped: "Might as well try to stop an express train. . . . Conacher isn't human that's all."<sup>138</sup> A reporter in Hamilton described his propensity to "hurl. . . himself relentlessly and unselfishly at the fray."<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, Conacher was almost literally a one man team. Or, as one spectator suggested to the editor of a Hamilton newspaper in 1931:

Say, who don't you dig up a good picture of Lionel Conacher and run an eight column 'layout' of the whole Argonaut team?<sup>140</sup>

Yet Conacher's tendency to "go it alone" did not always work to his advantage. When he played football in Pittsburgh in 1923 where interference or blocking was legal, Conacher was unable to use his blocking to its best advantage. He was criticized for this deficiency well into the season at a time when he should have adapted to blocking.<sup>141</sup> As a junior A hockey player, Conacher was noted for his inclination to carry the puck himself<sup>142</sup> and in lacrosse he was chastized, at the height of his prowess in the field game, for not passing enough.<sup>143</sup> Mike Rodden, sportswriter, football player and coach, summarized Conacher's proclivity toward being a one man team.:

But in team play Conacher fell down. He went it alone. His team-mates were just filling in and as a result his team lost much of its effectiveness.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, Conacher preferred team sports, excelled in those sports, but he was a unit unto himself in his teams' arsenal

With some sixteen or seventeen years of athletic participation at the senior amateur level and above, Conacher's physique suffered as a result of being

“hurled at the fray.” After three operations to repair his broken nose, he finally decided to live with the physical defect. Conacher enumerated his own sprains, strains, cuts, stitches, cartilage removals and broken bones near the end of his career.<sup>145</sup> The factor so prominent in his success that is highlighted by the number of injuries he sustained and by his year-round sport participation is stamina. With the possible exception of his playing days as an alcoholic with the New York Americans in the late 1920s, Conacher was involved in sport all year. He was never out of condition and he was noted for always practicing with full effort. Football, lacrosse and hockey, prior to 1925, were sports in which he played the entire game. Professional wrestling, he once remarked, was the most physically-demanding sport he had played.<sup>146</sup>

As he was fit, so was he possessed of fierce determination—and a decided will to win. Conacher’s comeback in 1930- 1931 after his problem with alcohol, attests to this fact poignantly. While with the Maroons hockey team in the later stage of his career, he was known to berate his teammates verbally between periods if he felt that they were not giving one hundred per cent to the game.<sup>147</sup> Lionel Jr. claimed that his father seldom discussed athletics, but that the comment he (Lionel Jr.) has always remembered his father making was that success in a sport is ninety percent attributable to mental determination.<sup>148</sup> Intrinsically, therefore, Conacher was possessed of a very strong will to win. He was, to say the least, competitive.

It begs the question to state that Conacher was talented. Finesse and gracefulness were not his trademarks but he had to have a great deal of natural ability to be as dominant as he was in so many sports. It is, perhaps, less evident of the manner in which that talent was channelled into and developed within a sport system. The Ardiel-Dominion bank—Argonauts—Hillcrests—Maitlands linkage has already been documented. All of those sport clubs were tied into Conacher’s athletic development and common to all of these clubs was the aspect of coaching. “Nip” Dwan developed Conacher as a football player and as a baseball player; Dick Carroll coached the Toronto Canoe Club Junior A Canadian hockey champions the year that Conacher played for that team and Carroll coached the Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets between 1923 and 1925 and he coached the Maitland lacrosse team in the early 1920s; in boxing, before Conacher won his Canadian championship in 1920, he was coached by Billy Hitchen of the Riverside Athletic Club, that club being “. . . known all across the continent as . . . a top notch boxing club. . . [which has] produced more champions than any other club in the Dominion;”<sup>149</sup> Bill Marsden,<sup>150</sup> who also developed two other famous Toronto athletes “Babe” Dye and Bill Burch, was Lionel’s athletic tutor in hockey with the Aura Lee hockey club; Sine McEvenue coached Conacher with the football Argonauts and Carl Snavelly coached him in Pittsburgh in the same sport; in professional hockey

he was under the coaching guidance of Odie Cleghom, Newsy Lalonde, and, most successfully, of Tommy Gorman in 1928-1929 with the New York Americans and during Conacher's two years as a member of Stanley Cup winning teams. Dwan, Marsden and Carroll must have been the most influential coaches he had since they directed his early years in sport. As a one man team, Conacher either rebelled against team play, or more likely, his coaches used the Big Train's ability to smash through defensive systems by encouraging team members to feed Conacher whenever possible.

Closely connected to the fact that Conacher was influenced by coaches, is the factor of handling and promotion. Harris Ardiel, it can be inferred with reasonable accuracy, controlled and directed Conacher as a friend as well as an athlete. Roy Schooley promoted Conacher through exposing him to Pittsburgh hockey crowds as a referee. Schooley then had Conacher built up in the press and sold to the public before the Canadian athlete arrived in Pittsburgh in the Fall of 1923.<sup>151</sup> Entrepreneurs in professional baseball, hockey, wrestling and lacrosse wanted Conacher because he was a drawing card as well as for the benefit of his athletic prowess in the various sports.

But it was in newspaper promotion that Conacher's career, awards, tributes and prowess were made known to the public. On July 3, 1940, Ralph Allen wrote in the *Globe and Mail*:

Off and on during the last twenty odd years, Lionel Conacher has received more unsolicited testimonials than Lydia Pinkham's Pink Pills or Gloria Swanson's legs. . . .

Even the fans assisted in cultivating his career through their submissions of such items as "What is a Conacher?,"<sup>152</sup> a descriptive analogy of Lionel to a new species of animal endowed with the outstanding physical abilities of a centipede, an octopus, a lion and a kangaroo, and "Conacher At Bat,"<sup>153</sup> a poetic copy of the classic Casey At Bat. Once, when a fan dared to suggest that Conacher made a weak excuse for a baseball error during a game in 1921, a Toronto sportswriter retaliated with: "Conacher never makes excuses for any of his misplays, and he is one of Toronto's most modest athletes."<sup>154</sup> Whether through game descriptions, sporting editorials or letters to editors from fans, Conacher was constantly promoted, wittingly and unwittingly. As was pointed out when rumours spread that Conacher might be going to Pittsburgh in 1923:

Conacher talks a great deal but he says nothing. The Champion footballer revels in the limelight. It is good for his business and not even Jack Dempsey gets more free publicity than he does . . . . But in the meantime he will get all the advertising possible.<sup>155</sup>

According to the writer of the above quotation, Conacher himself was not unaware of his own promotion. Newspaper coverage and promotion magneti-

cally followed Conacher from city to city between 1920 and 1927. This journalistic treatment constantly reminded the public of his ability and his achievements and, in so doing, must have been a tremendous motivator to Conacher to excel and to live up to societal expectations of him.

Perhaps the most classic illustration of Conacher's attraction to the public press occurred in 1926. While he was recuperating in a Montreal hospital from one of the operations on his nose, Conacher was unable to make a league game with the Pirates in New York. The banner headline, in huge, bold letters at the top of the first page of the *Pittsburgh Post*, January 19, 1926, sporting section read: "Conacher Did Not Accompany Local Hockey Club to New York." When he organized and played professional football in 1933 and 1934, Conacher used his own reputation in the game advertisements. There is no record of Conacher being contracted to company sponsorship until the 1930s. During that decade, cigarette firms such as Philip Morris ("Call for Lionel Conacher") and Navy Cut would associate their products with his name and, sometimes, give athletic highlights of his career.<sup>156</sup> Conacher also supported Spalding equipment through advertisements.<sup>157</sup> The point is that the press was saturated with Lionel Conacher. Such favourable attention and promotion could have served only to enhance him as an athlete. It resulted in a promoter, Ivan Michailoff, being able to induce Conacher to become a professional wrestler and to use Conacher's reputation to attract fans in that quasi-sport.

Closely connected to the promotional aspect of his career, is the element of incentive or external motivation that accrued to Conacher as a result of public adoration. He was exciting to watch because of his unique style and fans idolized him. One spectator wrote an ode to him that appeared in an Oshawa paper on June 30, 1922.<sup>158</sup> When it was announced that he was to leave Toronto to go to the United States, Toronto mayor, Frank Plant presented Conacher with a travelling bag and a floral horseshoe: "The floral offering is a gift from local admirers who are taking the opportunity of paying public tribute to the prowess of Canada's greatest athlete."<sup>159</sup> Ottawa supporters gave him a similar wreath a few days later.<sup>160</sup> One Toronto newspaper featured Conacher in a cartoon series entitled "Life's Greatest Moments." The particular sketch showed Conacher in winter overcoat taking the time to shake hands with a little boy carrying a hockey stick. The caption read: "The Chance to Say 'Hullo' to Lionel Conacher."<sup>161</sup> His status as a sport celebrity earned Conacher a brand new "Hudson coach" car purchased by hockey fans within four months of Conacher's arrival in Pittsburgh.<sup>162</sup> People even sent money to newspapers to purchase a wedding present for Conacher.<sup>163</sup> When Lionel and his brother, Charlie, opened a service station in 1935:

For more than two hours, cars in a steady line were driven into the station. Hundreds of men and

boys attended and before the evening closed, the Conachers, in spite of their winter training, had their arms stiffened in “writer’s cramp” from slinging down their autographs.<sup>164</sup>

The Toronto Maple Leaf Gardens establishment staged a Lionel Conacher night in 1931, during a Maroons-Leafs lacrosse game, to honour the home town athlete.<sup>165</sup> In short, Conacher was worshipped by the public. The tributes and awards presented to him by his sporting admirers must have acted as a motivational impulse to excel. In concert with his physical size, prowess, style, determination, coaching and sport system opportunities and promotion and handling, Conacher’s public adoration worked to produce the “Big Train.”

Conacher’s fame and prowess were spread through all of the advertising and promotion of his exploits in athletics. Immediately he had retired from professional sport, he was elected into provincial politics as a Liberal.<sup>166</sup> While his Conservative opponent expressed some doubt about Conacher’s ability to prepare a verbal presentation— “He has about as much to do with preparing speeches as he had in preparing the Ten Commandments”<sup>167</sup>—there were others who were sensitive to Conacher’s unique advantage as a well known athlete:

Connie has been groomed for a seat in the Ontario legislature. It is a good trick if he can make it for he is invading a Conservative stronghold.<sup>168</sup>

He opened an office above his service station to allow his constituents to come to talk with him and he kept that office open when elected to federal Parliament in 1949.<sup>169</sup> Therefore, by the time of the Canadian Press poll late in 1950, Conacher had been a Member of Provincial Parliament for six years and a Member of Parliament for almost two years. He had served his province and his country in high office. His contributions to government could only have served to make his name known across the country in 1950.

The number of times that Conacher was promoted, and deservedly so, as *greatest* in sport(s) could not have left much doubt in the minds of Canadian Press poll sportscasters and sportswriters as to who was Canada’s *greatest* male athlete of the half century. In football, in 1923, he was hailed as “. . . the greatest rugby player who ever graced a Canadian gridiron.” But it was as early as 1920 that Conacher was first referred to with the superlative adjective, *greatest*:

True to the expectation of a few, however, Connie came along and almost overnight as it were leaped into prominence and made his mark in the athletic world as one of the *greatest*—if not the *greatest* all round athlete—ever developed in this city.<sup>171</sup>

From that time forward, the word *greatest* was invariably connected to his

name. For example, prior to a lacrosse game in 1924, people were encouraged with the following warning: “Don’t miss this opportunity to see Conacher, Canada’s greatest all round athlete in action.”<sup>172</sup> In 1927, the *New York American* stated that Conacher “. . . could justly claim the distinction of being the best all round performer in the sport world today. Conacher, a native of Toronto, is probably the greatest athlete the Dominion ever had.”<sup>173</sup> By the 1930s, the term “Canada’s Greatest Athlete” became the standard billboard and newspaper advertisement for prospective games in which Conacher was to play. By a simple process of extension, there was really only one candidate for the 1950 Canadian Press poll for the greatest male athlete of the first half century. If one considers that the sports he played in and excelled at were those that were and are associated with Canada, namely, lacrosse, hockey and Canadian football, it becomes readily apparent why he was selected by such a wide margin over any other candidate.

Concomitant with the reasons for Conacher’s success in so many sporting endeavours, namely, the factors of size, power, fierce determination to excel, stamina, superior coaching and access to quality sports clubs in a large urban area, handling and promotion was the greater media factor that helped to form and to proliferate the Conacher legend. It is well accepted that “. . . whoever controls the microphones and printing presses of a society can create a synthetic hero overnight.”<sup>174</sup> The “Big Train” legend was contrived by the media and expounded across an international border and throughout many North American cities between 1920 and 1927. Yet he lived up to his media promotion through his excellence in sport— he was no synthetic hero and his prowess was an enduring and consistent feature of his athletic performance. Conacher literally rose from poverty to parliament with his sporting accomplishments being the single factor that accounts for this ascendancy. He was Canada’s greatest athlete overwhelmingly recognized as such by the media. Scant attention or recognition is given to Conacher in Canada’s premier athletic shrine, the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame in Toronto, Ontario. In deserving fashion, he is highlighted in the Canadian Football Hall of Fame in Hamilton, Ontario. But Lionel Conacher, the man who dominated a variety of sports over a seventeen year period, has been ignored as an outstanding Canadian, as a great athlete and as a subject worthy of serious academic study by historians.

## Notes

1. See, for example, *Toronto Star Weekly*, Nov. 11, 1922, *Toronto Sunday World*, July 22, 1923, *Minnesota Times*, Jan. 19, 1924. The analogy is intriguing. Both athletes were voted greatest athlete of the half century and greatest football player of the half century in national polls within their respective countries. They died within fourteen months of each other, the date of Conacher’s death being May 26, 1954.

2. Walter Turner, "World's Greatest Athlete," *SIR!*, I: 12 (October 1943): 18, 52 and 53. This article was written more than five years after Conacher's retirement from competitive sport. Moreover, it was published in New York and distributed mostly in the United States. Turner solicited verbal and/or written support for his thesis from Grantland Rice, John Kieran, Jack Dempsey, Joe Lally, Nick Bawlf, Carl Snavelly and Ford Frick, among others.
3. The forward line of Joe Primeau, "Busher" Jackson and Lionel's younger brother, Charlie, achieved considerable success and fame in the NHL during the Depression years.
4. See, Frank Consentino, "Sport in the Land of the Beaver, Eagle and Bear," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation*, 44: 5 (May/June 1978), 16- 17 for further amplification of this concept.
5. The given name, Pretoria, derived from being born in Toronto on May 24, 1900, the day Canadian troops taking part in that Boer War siege returned to Canada. Turner, "World's Greatest Athlete," p. 18 and Mrs. Victoria "Queen" Conacher-Mayhue (Conacher's sister), personal interview, Huntington Woods, Michigan, November, 1978.
6. Canadian Press staff writer, Jack Sullivan, organized a nation-wide, twenty-two question ballot designed to select and pay tribute to outstanding athletes in the 1900- 1950 period. The individuals who made the selections were forty-three sportswriters and sportscasters across the Dominion. Each of these persons was asked to name the greatest athlete of the period in football, basketball, golf, hockey, lacrosse, rowing, soccer, swimming, tennis, track and field and to select the best basketball team, hockey team, lacrosse team, football team, soccer team and to pinpoint the most dramatic sports event, the "biggest" upset and the most significant sports trend. Two other categories listed were the greatest female athlete of the half century and the greatest male athlete of the half century; the latter (presumably the most prestigious) was last to be announced in the press. Newspapers across Canada carried the daily announcements as they were released between December 20 and December 31, 1950. It is significant to note that for the first time, the annual Canadian Press award to Canada's male athlete of the year was renamed the Lionel Conacher award this year and was presented to the first recipient on January 13, 1979.
7. The terms greatest male athlete, best all-round athlete, outstanding all-round male athlete and greatest athlete of the half century were used interchangeably in the newspaper articles in 1950 and in subsequent magazine articles.
8. No descriptive appellation as "Big Train" so accurately pinpoints the nature of Conacher's physical approach to all sports. The epithet was, to the best of the writer's knowledge, first applied to professional baseball pitcher, Walter Johnson (Washington Senators). The first Canadian to be so labeled was Smirle Lawson, the outstanding running half-back for the University of Toronto circa 1909 (Cosentino, *Canadian Football: The Grey Cup Years* (Toronto: Musson Book Company Limited, 1969), pp. 36-37. The coincidence of the name Lionel being the brand name of model train sets, popular in North America, makes the nickname Big Train even more apropos from a current perspective.
9. Benjamin and Elizabeth Conacher were the parents of eleven children (one died shortly after birth), Lionel being the third child and eldest male. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, Detroit, November, 1978.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See, for example, Trent Frayne, "The Clan Conacher" in *The Mad Men of Hockey* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974), pp. 93- 109 and Charles Conacher and Trent Frayne "Me and My Family . . . the Story of the Conachers" *MacLean's Magazine*, 70: 5-part series of articles from March 2 to April 27, 1957.
12. It was not uncommon for Lionel to switch teams during a season, especially during his amateur career prior to the 1925-1926 hockey season. No newspaper or journal summary of his career, despite many attempts, examined by the writer were accurate. Careful cross referencing among newspaper articles, journal sources and scrapbook materials was undertaken in order to warrant any entry in Table I. *The New York Times*, May 27, 1954, claimed that Conacher's athletic career began in 1916 when he won a free membership to the Y.M.C.A. in a newspaper sales contest.
13. Scrapbook belonging to Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, p. 123. The scrapbook is a unique record of Lionel's later athletic career and is composed of press clippings collected between 1930 and 1940.
14. *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, December 28, 1950. Conacher received almost three times as many votes, in this particular ballot, as his nearest rival, Joe Krol.
15. *Toronto Daily Star*, May 27, 1954. McAllister was best known for his radio programme, Canadian Sports Album, aired on the CBC every Sunday afternoon in the late 1940s and early 1950s.
16. Newspapers seldom carried descriptions of junior and intermediate competitions especially during war years. Consequently, little is known about his early football career. During the 1916 season he was sidelined with a broken collarbone. One other factor that might account for Conacher's football team peregrinations is recruitment.

17. Hockey Hall of Fame. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, 1922- 1944 (also Provincial Archives of Ontario, Manuscript Group 28 I 99, vol. 19), p. 24. The dates listed in the title of this source are incorrect. The scrapbook contains many newspaper articles that were written as early as 1919.
18. *Ibid.*, n.p.
19. *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, December 28, 1950.
20. Andy O'Brien, personal interview, Montreal, April, 1978. O'Brien is a well known and well respected sportswriter in Canada and he was in attendance at the game in question in 1922. Although Conacher disputed the fact (See, Lionel Conacher and Andy W. O'Brien, "You've Got to be Tough" *MacLean's Magazine*, 49: (Septembr 1, 1936), pp. 45-46), O'Brien was certain that Arless' neck was snapped by the upward thrust of Conacher's knee. In a benefit game for the Allan Arless Memorial Fund, \$12,000 was raised for Arless' widow. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 42. "A pleasant feature of the game was the fact that at half time Capt. Conacher of the Argonauts handed Mr. Johnston, the President of the Montreal Football Club, a cheque for \$1,500.00 to swell the Trust Fund." Public Archives of Canada, Manuscript Group I 128, vol. 8, Montreal Football Club Minute Book, 1920- 1929, p. 67.
21. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 34.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 78. Always the descriptions of his style were consistent: "Conacher is as rough as pig iron, a big man of granite who hits the line with all the strength of a battering ram rimmed with a concrete tip." *Ibid.*, p. 90.
23. The Lou Marsh Trophy, the annual emblem given to the outstanding Canadian athlete, was donated for the first time in 1937, the year of Conacher's retirement.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 106, brackets mine.
25. *The Morning Albertan*, Calgary, December 3, 1921.
26. The final score was 23-0 in that 1921 Grey Cup. *Ottawa Citizen*, December 28, 1950. Conacher scored two touchdowns (five points each), one field goal and two single points. Later accounts of that game have incorrectly attributed up to 20 and sometimes all 23 points to Conacher.
27. Even the most casual perusal of the sport pages of the *Toronto Telegram*, the *Toronto Daily Star* and the *Toronto Star Weekly* between September and December, 1921, will verify this fact.
28. Hockey Hall of Fame. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook 1923- 1957 (also, Public Archives of Canada, Manuscript Group 28 I 99, vol. 20), p. 4. One Toronto newspaper lamented the loss in a somewhat less than humble fashion: "The success of the United States of America in recently capturing the Superman of Canada, forms one of the Yankees' greatest victories since the War of Independence." September 23, 1923, article in Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 7.
29. *Ottawa Citizen*, May 27, 1954.
30. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, November 5, 1923.
31. October 27, 1923, newspaper clipping in Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 15.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 13- 14.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
34. *Globe and Mail*, July 3, 1940. Snavely, who earned his football coaching reputation at Cornell University, submitted his verbal tribute of Conacher in amplification of an earlier, June 7, article written in praise of Conacher .
35. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p. The incident occurred at Lansdowne Park in Ottawa in 1921.
36. See, *infra*, p. 24.
37. Conacher and Frayne, "Lionel could do anything," *MacLean's Magazine*, 70: (March 30, 1957), p. 25.
38. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978. His motivation, as Charlie Conacher claimed, may have stemmed from the Montreal Maroons placing him on waivers in the N.H.L. and/or from his wife's first pregnancy. Conacher and Frayne, "Lionel could do anything," p. 25.
39. *Montreal Star*, May 27, 1954.
40. Cosentino, *Canadian Football*, p. 98 and Scrapbook belonging to Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, p. 3.
41. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 3. The word "outright" suggests at least suspicion, on the part of the sportswriter, of semi-professional practices in "amateur" leagues.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 1 and p. 23 and Cosentino, *Canadian Football*, p. 98.
43. He signed with the Aromints on August 31, 1934. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 68.
44. See, for example, the *Toronto Telegram*, Oct. 4, 17, 19 and 20, 1934. A sample topic for an article would be, "the duties of outside wings."

45. For the history of that expansion process, see, Henry H. Roxborough, *The Stanley Cup Story* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1964), pp. 61- 71 and Frederick Edwards, "Patrick's Progress" *MacLean's Magazine*, 49: 2-part article, (Feb. 1, 1936 and Feb. 15, 1936).
46. Cartoon and career summaries in the press emphasized this myth continually. See, Lionel Conacher Scrapbooks, vols. 19 and 20. Although Conacher was described as a fast and powerful skater, his style was awkward. Perhaps the myth was created and perpetuated as an excuse to maintain Conacher's public image as a superlatively skilled athlete.
47. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978.
48. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 6.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
50. This point is underlined by the fact that Conacher was being coached and managed by the Aura Lee Athletic Club for the two years prior to and the two years after the 1919- 1920 season with the Toronto Canoe Club. While there is no concrete evidence to suggest recruitment, it is reasonable to speculate that the T.C.C. team was carefully chosen.
51. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 32.
52. *Ottawa Citizen*, April 25, 1920, and Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 4. Although Conacher is often given credit for winning the heavyweight title that year, he did not. Confusion and myth have arisen from the fact that he was a heavyweight finalist that year, but was forced to drop out after a few seconds of sparring due to a hand injury sustained in the lightheavyweight final.
53. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 60.
54. *Ibid.*, n.p.
55. *Toronto Star Weekly*, April 1, 1922. Conacher joined the 1919- 1920 team late in the season. His team won the Bogert Cup again in the 1921- 1922 season.
56. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 2. The offer was made public on November 11, 1922.
57. Lou Marsh, "How Amateur Are Canadian Amateurs?" *MacLean's Magazine*, 38: (October 15, 1925), p. 17.
58. *Ottawa Journal*, July 24, 1923. Conacher even had a business calling card printed up with a small photograph of himself in one corner, his name at the top in bold letters and "Cleaning, Dyeing and Pressing" in the center of the card. he was established with one truck and 200 contracts at 41 Bloor St. East. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p.
59. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978.
60. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 52. The night that the Aura Lee team won that trophy was the same evening, December 3, 1921, following the Argonauts Grey Cup victory. Conacher played in both games,
61. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, April 13, 1922.
62. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 95.
63. *Ibid.*, n.p.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
65. *Ibid.* Regarding the issue of Conacher's amateurism, it is significant to note that when Conacher joined the Toronto Argonauts in 1921, he stated that some of the pressure to do so had come from his associates at the Toronto Dominion bank who were also playing for the Argonauts. The implications are, of course, preferential employment to athletes or, naively, pure coincidence.
66. Marsh, "How Amateur Are Canadian Amateurs?," p. 17.
67. *Ibid.* True amateurs, according to the Canadian definition said Marsh, were as scarce in Canada in 1925 "as skate sharpeners are in Central Africa." *Ibid.*, p. 16.
68. *Ottawa Citizen*, July 25, 1923, and *Toronto Star Weekly*, Sept. 16, 1922. One source, who preferred to remain anonymous, claimed Conacher lived with Mr. and Mrs. Ardiel in the early 1920s. The only evidence the writer could find concerning Ardiel's business interest was an undated press clipping in one scrapbook that referred to him as ". . . formerly manager of one of the branches of the Dominion bank" in Toronto. If this was in fact the case, it would certainly explain Conacher's employment in the same firm.
69. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 4. One Toronto newspaper claimed that Conacher's wedding aroused more interest and discussion than any wedding held in the Queen City "in quite some time." *Toronto Sunday World*, September 23, 1923.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

71. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, November 13, 1923. The article described Ardiel as “peppery.”
72. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 21, and p. 64.
73. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, February 12, 1924. The 1922 offer of \$5,000 had been reduced to \$4,000 in 1924 for some unexplained reason.
74. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p. The quotation is taken from a 1920 newspaper clipping.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 67, brackets mine.
76. *Toronto Daily Star*, *Toronto Star Weekly* and *Toronto Evening Telegram* examined between 1920 and 1923 inclusive.
77. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Toronto Star Weekly*, August 5, 1922. Even while playing junior lacrosse, the press described his penetrating ability with the words, “boring tactics.” *Globe*, August 22, 1918.
81. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 127.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 115 and *Toronto Star Weekly*, September 2, 1922.
83. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 55. Lally was a renowned lacrosse player, promoter and stick manufacturer.
84. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, July 21, 1923, brackets mine.
85. *Toronto Star Weekly*, June 4, 1921.
86. See, for example, Turner, “World’s Greatest Athlete,” p. 18. His Canadian Press poll tribute in 1950 even listed both games (in June!) as championship games. See, *Montreal Star*, December 30, 1950.
87. See, for a tribute to his pitching prowess in 1923.
88. See, Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 119 and p. 114 for several descriptions of games in 1922 and 1923 when Conacher’s prowess at bat achieved victory in the last inning. As a sidelight, it is interesting to note that Conacher’s favorite books were the sagas of Frank and Dick Merriwell. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978. The *Toronto Star Weekly*, Feb. 3, 1923, referred to Conacher as “. . . Hillcrests slugging wonder.”
89. *Ibid.*, n.p.
90. *Oshawa Spectator*, July 12, 1922.
91. *Toronto Star Weekly*, April 1, 1922.
92. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
94. *Toronto Daily Star*, January 30, 1926. Conacher signed on this date in 1926. At the time of signing the manager of the Leafs, Mr. D. Howley, stated that Conacher would provide spectator appeal. In Howley’s own words, “. . . he will be a decided assets [sic] from a box office point of view whether he plays or not.” *Ibid.* In negotiating his contract, Conacher stipulated that the terms were to be such that he could not be sold or traded during the 1926 season.
95. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 138.
96. Duquesne Garden 1923-1924 program in Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, n.p. The dimensions of the rink’s artificial ice surface was 249½ by 88 feet, with a seating capacity of 5000.
97. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 11.
98. *Ibid.*
99. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 133.
100. The team was hand picked. If the Duquesne Garden facility was as lavish and outstanding a facility as it was advertised to be, plans had to be in Schooley’s mind for a professional franchise.
101. *Jack Canuck* (May 3, 1924), p. 15. Marsh also referred to Conacher’s employment as an insurance agent. Marsh, “How Amateur Are Canadian Amateurs?,” p. 17.
102. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 25.
103. *Boston Post*, January 29, 1924. The article used Conacher to promote the game that evening.
104. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 41. The date of the article was February 8, 1924.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 45. Smith and Conacher had 42 goals between them in regular season play. That total was better than the total for any two forwards in the league that year. By the end of the year, Conacher led the league with 87 points; his nearest rival had 51. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
108. *Ibid.*, p. 56. Less than a year later, appreciative Pittsburgh fans gave Conacher a new Hudson "in appreciation for his playing and leadership." *Ibid.*, p. 75.
109. *Pittsburgh Post*, November 11, 1925. The article claimed that Conacher turned down a New York offer of 10,000 dollars to play hockey there.
110. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, pp. 88-89. While back in Toronto during the summer and fall of 1925, Conacher asked the Argonaut football club for the opportunity to play one last game for that team before he turned professional. The team that he would have played was the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association. The president of the M. A. A. A. said that if Conacher played, the Association would not play since it was rumored that Lionel was acting as a manager for the Pirates in closing contracts with the Pittsburgh players. As such, said the M. A. A. A. president, he would have been a professional.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
112. *Pittsburgh Post*, Decembr 17, 1926. Conacher had been fined 200 dollars by Cleghorn for showing up two weeks late in the Fall of 1926.
113. *Ibid.*
114. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 110, brackets mine.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
116. *The Pocket Hockey Encyclopedia* (Toronto: The Pagurian Press Ltd., 1972), p. 49.
117. *Montreal Star*, July 8, 1931.
118. One source reported that Conacher scored 107 goals against his nearest competitor's 56. See, Harry Shane, "Conacher the Versatile," *MacLean's Magazine* 45 (Sept. 1, 1932), p. 34. Newspaper coverage in the *Montreal Star* over the entire lacrosse season, June to October inclusive, indicated that Conacher scored 97 goals.
119. *Ottawa Citizen*, December 23, 1950.
120. Lionel Conacher Jr., personal interview, June 1977.
121. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, April 3, 1923.
122. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 13.
123. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
125. *Toronto Daily Star*, May 4, 1932.
126. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 9, brackets mine.
127. *Toronto Daily Star*, May, 1932. Conacher's first bout took place in the Mutual St. Arena, Toronto, during a six day bicycle race. Marsh exclaimed "The bike crowd went mad with delight. They whooped and hurrahed until the bike riders slowed down to a crawl around the pretzel-shaped bowl to see what it was all about." *Ibid.*
128. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 25.
129. *Ibid.*, p. 116 and *The Pocket Hockey Encyclopedia*, p. 50.
130. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 9.
131. *The Pocket Hockey Encyclopedia*, p. 50. In playoff games, he scored only 2 goals and 2 assists. He certainly was not the prolific goal scorer he had been in amateur hockey.
132. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 139.
133. He was the original president of the N.H.L. Old Timers Association, formed in 1951. *Toronto Telegram*, May 27, 1954.
134. Conacher's death, similar to his sports career, was somewhat of a puzzle. He collapsed on third base after stretching a double into a triple and was pronounced dead before an ambulance could get to Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Earlier in the game, he had been struck in the head by a wild throw. The official cause of his death was listed as a heart attack by Ontario's chief coroner, and former Big Train, Dr. Smirle Lawson. Yet, Lawson ordered that no autopsy was to be done on Conacher. When he collapsed at third base and was at-

tended to, it was noticed that he was hemorrhaging from the mouth. For that reason, no one was able to administer artificial respiration. *Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Star, Toronto Daily Star, Toronto Telegram, Vancouver Sun, Globe and Mail and Winnipeg Free Press*, May 27, 1954. From viewing family films, the writer was most impressed with Conacher's physique, even in the late 1940s. Conacher's eldest daughter recalled that he worked out daily with a punching bag in the basement of his home right up until his death. It is possible that he did not die of a heart attack and that the blow to his head was the principal cause of his death. It seems unlikely that a man as healthy as Conacher would expire running bases.

135. *Ottawa Citizen*, May 27, 1954.

136. *Ibid.*

137. *Vancouver Sun*, May 27, 1954.

138. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, n.p. The quotation was taken from an Ottawa press clipping during the football season of 1921.

139. *Ibid.*

140. *Ibid.*, p. 112. In 1922, the Toronto press speculated on the Argonauts' chances against Parkdale: "But Argos are mainly a one-man team. If anything should happen to Conacher, few would care to wager on their chances." *Ibid.*, p. 109. And a Hamilton newspaper read: "Argos without Conny will be like the proverbial ship minus its rudder." Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 3.

141. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 15.

142. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 16.

143. *Ibid.*, n.p.

144. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 126.

145. Conacher and O'Brien, "You've Got to be Tough," p. 45.

146. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978.

147. Andy O'Brien, personal interview, April, 1978.

148. Lionel Conacher, Jr., personal interview, June, 1977.

149. *Toronto Star Weekly*, February 12, 1921, brackets mine. One puzzle that has not been solved concerns Conacher's non-selection to the 1920 Olympic boxing team.

150. Mrs. Conacher-Mayhue claimed that it was Marsden who first took an interest in Lionel and that Marsden became a close friend of the Conacher family. Mrs. Victoria Conacher-Mayhue, personal interview, November, 1978.

151. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 12. The Pittsburgh press would, for example, ask Conacher to list the best football players in the United States.

152. *Ibid.*, vol. 19, n.p.

153. *Ibid.*,

154. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

155. *Ibid.*, vol. 20, p. 6.

156. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 19 and 23.

157. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

158. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 20, p. 2.

159. *Ibid.*, vol. 19, n.p.

160. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, July 30, 1923.

161. Lionel Conacher Scrapbook, vol. 19, p. 118. The cartoon appeared on January 27, 1923.

162. *Ibid.*, vol. 20, p. 75.

163. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

164. Scrapbook, Conacher-Mayhue, p. 78. The Moto Sway Oil Company attached itself to the Conacher brothers' service station enterprise to sell their product through the "idols of a sports loving public." *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 400.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 401. The writer was Baz O'Meara of the *Montreal Star*.

169. Conacher lost in his bid for provincial re-election in 1943.

170. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, January 1, 1923.

171. *Toronto Star Weekly*, December 24, 1920.

172. *Toronto Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1924.

173. *New York American*, January 9, 1927.

174. Randy Roberts, "Jack Dempsey: An American Hero in the 1920's" in *Sport Sociology: Contemporary Themes*, edited by Andrew Yiannakis *et al.* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1979), p. 45. Roberts cited the classic work by Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitations and Possibility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), chapter one.

