

Sport and Class in Central Canada in the Nineteenth Century

by

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(Maxwell L. Howell Address)

Canadian social historians have virtually ignored the history of sport and games. A.R.M. Lower, whose *Canadians in the Making* (1958) was the first, and thus far the only general social history of Canada, mentioned sport only to denounce its influence. According to Lower, organized sport in Canada dated from the 1890s; its onset was a sign of the breaking up of traditional Canadian rural and small town society. Sport itself was the creation of “the irresponsibles of society” from the top and bottom rungs, and had contributed to the erosion of older values and their replacement by those of a culture in decline.

Few Canadian historians would go as far as Lower; at the same time, however, his view that sport is not a legitimate field of enquiry for serious minded historians (despite the seriousness of the charge he levelled against it) seems to be generally shared. In this respect, Canadian social historians clearly lag behind their counterparts elsewhere, and are being outdistanced by both sociologists and by sports history generated in faculties of physical education in Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to challenge both Lower’s position and the general taboo on sports history by Canadian historians, and to point out that, apart from the intrinsic merit of the field, sports history can throw considerable light on important social, cultural and intellectual aspects of Canadian life. The period surveyed is roughly that from 1860 to 1900; evidence is drawn chiefly from primary material produced in Ontario and Quebec.

A view of social development that fails to incorporate the “play” element does less than justice to the past, and overlooks important cultural material. Canada, like the United States, is made up of many ethnic strands, and there is considerable evidence that sport has been a factor in the remarkable degree of survival of ethnic particularism (as well as being important in the acculturation process). Each group had its special athletic tradition. The French Canadians, for example, with their emphasis upon feats of strength and endurance, exemplified not only the patterns of a rural and pre-industrial society, but the mental outlook of a people dominated by outsiders. The Scots, on the other hand, contributed not only their talents in politics, religion, education and business, but also their love for such games as curling and for contests directly related to the rise of track and field sports. The two examples allow one to ask: to what degree did sport assist in the maintenance of ethnic particularism, and to what extent was it a factor in breaking it down?

Organized sport in Canada is much older than Lower thought it was, dating really from the Confederation era of the 1860s. Through much work needs to be done in this period, it is plain that sport was part and parcel of the main line of social development, rather than a divergence from it. Its rise, of course, was tied to urban growth; its leaders came, not from “the top and the bottom” but from the same urban groups that supplied the drive, leadership and management techniques crucial to the political and economic aspects of the nation-building process.

Montreal in many ways was the cradle of organized sport in Canada. From its business, professional and educational groups came the men who refined, created or

organized the sports of lacrosse, hockey, Canadian football and basketball . The Montreal Amateur Athletic Association was the first organization of its kind in Canada, and a pattern for the rest. Generally speaking, unless a sport commanded the interest and energies of Montreal's upper middle class and middle class (or of comparable urban groups elsewhere), it suffered in terms of organization and popularity . Sports patronized by the old colonial upper class and its descendants, like cricket and the hunt, existed as "enclave" sports; sports disapproved of by the urban respectables, like boxing, pedestrianism or harness racing, failed to achieve significant development in this period.

Not only did sport enlist the energies of the solid citizenry, it exemplified their outlook and values as well. The period is rich in material justifying participation in sports and games as an important preparation for life, by acquainting young men (if not young women) with the rules of the game, fair play, manliness, and other character-building virtues . Men like W.G. Beers, W.K. McNaught, Sir Casimir Gzowski and Dr. James Naismith attached great importance to the moral qualities inherent in sport . Far from being the preoccupation of the lightminded and frivolous, Canadian sport was shot through with the characteristic Canadian moral earnestness.

There are some indications that the organizing leadership supplied by the urban elites, and the consequent popularization of the games they took up, brought interesting social shifts by the end of the century. The democratization and the beginnings of professionalization of certain sports led at least some of the leadership groups to turn to other areas : to golf, tennis, yachting, and canoeing and the growing outdoor movement.

A number of problems arise. Why did substantial elements of the urban middle classes turn to sports, in so wholehearted a manner, at precisely the time they did ? To what extent is the rationalizing, organizing and creative impulse they supplied part of a general international phenomenon, and to what extent a product of the well-documented Canadian itch for regularity and order? What explains the swift movement for the organization of national competition within virtually every sport, which it is contended Canada displayed to a much more marked extent than did the United States in the same period?

Whatever the answers may be to these questions, they are surely important enough to merit the attention of social historians, quite apart from the exuberant diversity of Canadian sport in the period.



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Speakers for the three major addresses at NASSH convention