

# The Function of the Tavern in Toronto 1834 to 1875 with Special Reference to Sport

by  
HOWARD CHRISTIE  
Ohio State University

The main focus of this paper concerned an examination of the relationship between the taverns and the sport of Toronto and the changes that this relationship underwent between 1834 and 1875. In advance of this, a description of the tavern's general function in the community life demonstrated it to be a temporary one. Initially, an abundance of functionally specialized buildings had naturally not been present, necessitating makeshift arrangements which often involved the tavern. There were singular uses in this respect but three categories cover the large body of purposes and these saw the tavern as a meeting site, as a centre for municipal affairs and as an entertainment locale. In almost all cases of this general function it was noted that the use of the tavern was not a lasting measure and disappeared as new means of accomplishing the desired ends were developed. This shift away from tavern locations was largely a result of the urbanizing process which was creating a city where a town had stood, with establishments of specific natures to fulfill these separate objectives the tavern had previously absorbed. In turning toward the sporting function of the tavern this same development was looked for, with the growth of facilities for the sport life of the city being a reality by 1875.

An assessment of the tavern-sport union throughout these years resulted in a division into four major functions served by this institution. These were *LOCATIONAL*, *ENTREPRENEURIAL*, *SOCIAL* AND *ORGANIZATIONAL* functions. The tavern not only served in these four capacities but it also served across two relatively distinct sporting levels: *CLUB* and *NON-CLUB* sport. Club sport of course refers to the various organizations of men who banded together linked by a common sport interest with the first recorded one in Toronto being the Toronto Cricket Club in 1834. Non-club sport naturally referred to all organized sporting endeavours in which the tavern was involved, outside of club affiliation. Participants in both these areas were largely from similar social strata (middle to upper classes) although the singularity of non-club sport may have allowed a greater influx from all societal levels than the necessary continuity of club activities.

The term *LOCATIONAL*, was devised to describe the fairly common occurrence of the tavern serving as the actual locale of sporting activity whether within the structure of the building or on the outer premises. Very little club sport was found to exist at taverns but non-club events were plentiful. Bowling and billiards made appearances with the latter becoming especially prominent at the better class hotels. Shooting matches, boxing and horse races were other activities which found tavern grounds convenient for their execution. The greater organization that club activities began to require by the sixties seemed to prohibit their use of the makeshift quarters a tavern would provide.

The *ENTREPRENEURIAL* function of the tavern categorized sponsorship of events which may or may not have been tavern located. The tavernkeeper was of course the catalyst in this development for any of several possible motivations. Here again club sport elements were very conspicuous by their absence as compared with the non-club activities.

Racing and shooting were the prime events benefitting from tavern sponsorship with inkeepers' plates at local tracks and prizes awarded for rifle competitions.

The *SOCIAL* function of the tavern was served when sporting folk used this institution as a gathering spot at the completion of their activity. Here both non-club and club services were performed by the tavern. Sleighing expeditions were popular, with the target of the rides often being a suburban inn and with parties composed of either tandem clubs or simply groups of friends. Club sport presented another opportunity here as post-match dinners between teams (often including an out of town club) were held at nearby hotels. Similarly, the club's end of season banquet used these surroundings.

A final use of the tavern, the *ORGANIZATIONAL* function concerned the meeting of a group or individuals before an activity to settle arrangements for its proper execution. Many of the non-club events which were singular in nature or perhaps carried out on an annual basis needed a base from which they could inform the public and make preparations for the activity and once again taverns performed the service. Racing activities (on water and land) especially, found taverns to be suitable organizational centres. Club sports perhaps made their greatest use of the tavern in this respect as they often met at a city hotel to execute their business on a continuing basis.

The tavern then was active between 1834 and 1875 in both club and non-club sport in four capacities. The *SOCIAL* and *ORGANIZATIONAL* functions crossed both levels while the tavern's *LOCATIONAL* and *ENTREPRENEURIAL* uses were largely to serve non-club ends. It had been expected that, as with the general function, the sporting function of the tavern would diminish by the 70's as specific structures were developed to take over the roles. However there seemed to be some holdover as the tavern's presence was still quite evident by the end of the period.