
Ned Hanlan — Canada's Premier
Oarsman
A Case Study in Nineteenth Century
Professionalism

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Even in the nineteenth century, the word “professional” did not have a universal meaning. More often than not it referred to an occupational, a member of the working class whose job was in a skill which could also be practiced as a sport. He was thought to have an unfair advantage over the social sportsman causing this latter group to seek ways to legislate him from their competitions.

Ned Hanlan, when still a young oarsman from Toronto, was one of the first athletes to be recognized as a professional in the sense of the nineteenth century expression. A group of backers formed the Hanlan Club thereby guaranteeing the young rower complete freedom to row without any of the distracting duties associated with preparing for stakes racing. The advantage of time available for rowing coupled with Hanlan's mechanical advantage, the innovation of the sliding seat, combined with the oarsman's psychological machinations to propel the young Torontonian to world champion status.

Though at times he was embroiled in controversies surrounding the integrity of his sport, Hanlan appeared to be above all contamination. He was a sport hero without parallel in his home country and almost equally well known and regarded in the United States, England and Australia. Although he was defeated in 1884, losing the world title he had held since 1880, he continued rowing actively until 1897. After serving as a coach at Columbia and the University of Toronto, Hanlan turned to politics as an Alderman in the city of Toronto. His death in 1908 resurrected a host of memories and in 1926 a bronze sculpture of Hanlan was unveiled overlooking the shores of Lake Ontario, scene of many of his victories.