
Sabbatarianism and Sport in Canadian Society

by
Barbara Schrodtt
University of Alberta

Sabbatarianism, the doctrine of strict observance of the Sabbath, has been in conflict with sport since the days of Elizabeth I and the proclamation of Puritan laws regulating the behavior of Englishmen on Sundays. From that time until the present century, those who would spend their Sundays watching or participating in sports activities have been opposed by those who would have all activities but rest and worship prohibited on that day. The history of this controversy in Canada is a unique one, combining an English and American religious and social heritage with the cultural duality that is fundamental to the structure of the Canadian nation.

During the nineteenth century, each colony, and later each province, developed its own customs and laws concerning Sunday activities, and the degree of severity varied from province to province. Participation in sports and games was usually prohibited, and violations of this law were often enforced. In 1889 the Lord's Day Alliance was formed, for the purpose of protecting the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship, and by 1906, it had succeeded in persuading the federal government to pass the Lord's Day Act of Canada. With this Act restricting Sunday activities, it became illegal ". . . to engage in any public game or contest for gain . . ." Amateur sport or recreational sports activities were not outlawed, but professional sport was not permitted. This Act is still in force in Canada.

The important feature that made this law different from Sunday laws in Great Britain and the United States was the clause giving provincial legislatures the right to enact specific exceptions to the Lord's Day Act. As a result of this, the Province of Quebec, in 1907, legalized certain activities which had been the custom of the province on Sundays, including professional sport; in practice, the Lord's Day Act made no important difference to the leisure activities of Quebec citizens.

All other Canadians were affected, however, and sports participants, supporters, and organizers immediately began to oppose the Lord's Day Act. Sportsmen began lobbying for change, finding and using all possible loopholes, and, on occasion, simply defying the law. At the same time, the Lord's Day Alliance sought to maintain the status quo and to ensure strict enforcement of the Act; the Alliance also endeavoured to discourage amateur sport as well, by the application of social and religious pressures.

In the decades following World War I, the attitude of most Canadians toward Sunday sport underwent noticeable change. Sunday became as much a day for leisure activities as for church worship, and with the increased secularization of the Sabbath, pressures grew for the approval of professional sports on Sundays. One of the important influences affecting society's changed outlook toward Sunday sports and recreation was a growing cosmopolitanism, a product of the influx of European immigrants, the return of soldiers from both wars, and improved communications that brought the world closer to Canadian communities.

Also, mass ownership of the automobile gave Canadians other alternatives to church on their one leisure day, and created, for those whose work allowed it, the family weekend excursion. Increased affluence was another important factor, encouraging the growth of popular Sunday sports such as golf. And with an ironic twist, organized labour, which had originally given the Lord's Day Alliance the support it needed to successfully lobby for the Lord's Day Act, turned against the puritanism of the Act and its restriction of leisure time enjoyment, and made strong demands in support of professional sport on Sundays.

By the time World War II was over, most Canadians favoured fewer restrictions on Sundays, and sport led the way in making the closed Canadian Sunday a custom of the past. An important milestone was reached in 1950, when Ontario enacted a law allowing local municipalities to approve professional sports on Sunday afternoons. Toronto quickly took advantage of this, and other Canadian cities began to press their provincial legislatures for the same privilege. For many years the Lord's Day Alliance and the churches strongly opposed Sunday professional sports and often made the passage of supporting legislation far from easy. Today, Sunday afternoon in Canada is a time for sports activities, but this has been achieved only after many years of dispute with religious and legal forces.
