

Sport in the Land of the Beaver, Eagle and Bear

by
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(Maxwell L. Howell Address)

The invitation to present the Maxwell Howell Address is a particularly pleasing one for me. As a graduate student at the University of Alberta, I had an opportunity to work with Max for three years. It was an opportunity to be involved with a man who had a concept; a vision of what was needed and a plan for doing it. Even more so than today, it was painfully obvious that a great void existed in the area of Canada's recorded sport history. Through Max Howell's hard work and perseverance, the University of Alberta's Faculty of Physical Education assumed national leadership developing, first, a foundation for sport and later more interpretive studies.

And yet while one has only to look at Alberta's list of theses at the Master's and Doctoral levels to see the great amount of work done in this area, it is also just as obvious that little of the material has made its way downward from the university to the high school and elementary students. Indeed, the general public, dependent upon its information from the media and publishing concerns has been so blithely affected by a cultural amnesia as to be unaware of its roots while looking about enviously at others.

This situation can be likened to a beaver busily engaged in the process of building a home. He moves with some deliberation carrying pieces of wood, seeking out branches, using the mud as mortar. It is obvious from watching him that he functions according to some plan. But imagine that this same purposeful beaver looks up and sights a beautiful high soaring eagle. It is such a magnificent spectacle, its wide wing span allowing it to drift effortless, alternately gliding, swooping and circling. It glories in its freedom. The beaver watches with a trace of envy; its imagination attempts to comprehend the essence of the eagle. Its thoughts roam, its imagination abounds with the notion of joining the eagle imitating its every move seemingly suspended high about the earth or perched atop its own version of Mount Olympus.

While the beaver is thus entranced, he becomes aware of the noise of brush separating. Looking across the river, he sees a huge and powerful bear making his way forcefully through the thick growth. The beaver changes his focus. The bear moves with purpose. Inevitably the winter will arrive; the bear must be ready. The beaver sees the bear foraging for food. The body must be nourished; the winter will be long. Again the beaver's mind wanders. There is a sense of admiration as the planning, the organization, the sense of intent overshadow the faint notions of the drudgery of the bear's existence. Viewed from afar, the limitations of this slow moving, ponderous, earthbound giant, are momentarily forgotten. The beaver again sees himself ambling alongside the bear, acting deliberately, resolutely preparing for the certain winter and the glorious spring.

The beaver is jarred loose from his wandering imagination by the loud sound of water. He turns to see his home being washed away. The interrupted construction is not strong enough to hold back the welled-up currents. Such is the price of the beaver's day dreams that he would have to start anew to build his home. By way of this illustration I'm attempting to point out just one of the problems which has developed in Canadian life in general and sport in particular. On the one hand there is an attraction to a "free" enterprise system; on the

other a noticeable need for government involvement. On the one hand there is the direction that politics must not interfere with sport; on the other, the equally accepted notion that sport must not interfere with politics.

The effect has been that the Canadian public receives little information through school or otherwise about its sporting culture. The development of sports such as baseball, football and hockey have been affected as each sought status as a “big league” venture. Hockey at the national and international level has had its focus re-adjusted to the point that the packaging has become more important than the product; the merchandising more important than the merchandise.

It seems in order that there be a re-orientation of our societal sporting goals. When Canada had the opportunity, the first since 1969, to send its best representatives to the 1977 World Hockey Championships, she chose to send representatives from ten of the eighteen NHL teams who did not make the playoffs. With the puck in her possession she chose to ice it; the public interest, once again, was overlooked in favour of commercial gain.

Throughout Canada’s history, there has been a tendency to lose sight of the Canadian focus in much of our sporting culture. We have seen it in our literature, in our films, in almost all of our media expression. It has occurred in our dominant team sports at a national level. Clearly it is happening in hockey at the International level; the evidence from the past is there for all to see. The beaver is neither eagle nor bear; when it tries to be one or the other, problems arise. When its industry is in concert with its basic interests, it flourishes. So too with sport in Canada.