

EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

Newspapers and the Development of Road-Races in Nova Scotia, 1900-1945

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The sport of pedestrianism, or road-racing as it is known in Nova Scotia, experienced an amazing rise in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century in the maritime province. As a result, several long distance running stars emerged who heaped glory and fame on their home province. Nevertheless, the sport was not born in a void. There existed in Nova Scotia at the time a very strong sporting heritage which provided a fertile ground for the inception and growth of a new sport. Newspapers were instrumental in fostering the growth and development of road-racing in the province.

Newspapers played a dominant role in the development of road-races because of three factors: sponsorship, education, and promotion. Sponsorship established the sport as a premier athletic event in the province; education encouraged the understanding of the sport and the proper training of the athletes; and promotion made the sport socially significant which assured road-races widespread support among the population of Nova Scotia.

Sponsorship was established by two methods. Newspapers would often assist local sports clubs in their efforts to organize road-races by donating prizes to the race committees and by covering the events faithfully. This practice was not unique to road-races. The newspapers did as much for other sports, music, theatre, and other community events. The second method though, direct sponsorship of annual road-races, was unique to road-races. This direct sponsorship established a regular road-racing season for the athletes and the fans. This in turn helped to build a tradition of road-racing in the province and assisted in the development of the dedicated competitor.

Newspapers aided the acceptance of road-races as a summer sport by educating "sports" to the intricacies of long distance running. First, newspapers reintroduced the classical symbolism of the distance runner; then they "created" local distance running heroes by focusing on some of the top distance runners of the time; and last, they published training advice for interested athletes who had had no previous experience running distances. As a result, a core of well-informed fans and well-prepared athletes was formed which gave the new sport greater stability.

Promotion was also an influential factor. Not only did it assure sponsorship of annual events and the development of dedicated athletes, officials, and fans, but it also brought the sport into the homes of many Nova Scotians, thus making the sport socially significant. There were four aspects to promotion: the promotion of the annual events themselves, the coverage of the events, the exposure of the running star, and the subjective reporting styles of the earlier sportswriters who highlighted the road-races with emotional accounts of the events.

Knowing what the newspapers did to encourage the development of road-races in Nova Scotia, it is also important to try to explain why newspapers involved themselves to the extent that they did. Newspapers at the turn of the century were the most influential form of mass communication in the nation. They were in a position to greatly affect any sport, and the support that they gave sport in Canada by extolling the character building virtues of athletic competition did much to change the role of sport in the Canadian society.

The newspaper campaign of sponsoring and promoting road-races succeeded because their efforts fell upon a fertile ground. Nova Scotians were avid sportsmen, and they were proud of their sporting heritage. Road-races, encouraged by newspapers, offered to the sporting population of the province an opportunity to participate in an athletic event which required very little capital outlay for equipment and facilities. And since road-races were often held during civic holidays, they quickly became social events as much as sporting events, thus attracting the attention of a great number of people.

Newspapers became involved in sponsoring road-races primarily because Upper Canadian newspapers were capitalizing on the long distance running craze which followed the running feats of Billy Sherring, Tom Longboat, and several other Canadian, American, and European runners in North America. The Halifax newspapers viewed themselves as progressive as their Ontario and Quebec counterparts and initiated sponsoring road-races in the province in 1907.



Jean Leiper, organizer extraordinaire. tells us how it was done.