

# Games and Good Learning: The Contribution of the English Public School to Canadian Amateur Sport

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The interest in select pastimes demonstrated by the early colonial elite in Canada might be viewed as a product of their former education, more often than not, in the great English ‘public’ school. It was this group of mostly wealthy, politically powerful individuals, who represent the founding members of many Canadian private schools. Their influence was primary in terms of the nature of the schools’ curriculum. They expressed a continued desire to see the games that they themselves had played back in England, being practiced in the new schools. Cricket and Rugby football in particular, were viewed as acceptable tools for impressing the virtues of manliness upon the minds of the young.

The early religious affiliation of the schools frequently determined the nature and content of the curriculum. A school promoted by the Anglican church would most certainly be steeped in English tradition, and as such would exude a strong emphasis upon the moral ideology of games playing. In contrast, those schools that had sprung from Baptist and Methodist origins were likely to place their prime emphasis upon religious education. The early schools of Ontario, Upper Canada College; Trinity College School; Bishop Ridley College; and St. Andrew’s College each contributed substantially to the growth of Canadian sport. As an aggregate they formed the Little Big Four, the earliest private scholastic conference in Canada, and one which paved the way for increased and well organized interscholastic competition in sport.

The schools moved westwards toward the end of the nineteenth century, and their numbers increased. In their added determination to replicate their forbears, increased emphasis was placed upon the traditions of the English “public” schools, characteristic team games, and upon the underlying ideology of “athleticism.” It was not long before another conference sprang up on the west coast, within which were included St. George’s School, The University School, Shawnigan Lake School, and Brentwood College School, all situated in the province of British Columbia.

Many of the masters employed in these schools were English. Having themselves been educated in the “public” schools, they brought with them the games that they had played as schoolboys, together with the attendant value of character development. They gave both knowledge and enthusiasm for the sports, and frequently competed in the same ranks as their pupils.

The interest for sport in the private schools received volumes of support in the nature of English literature which flooded into the country. Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, together with other authors of nineteenth and twentieth century

schoolboy literature, consciously extolled the virtues of muscular Christianity and of the Philistine games of cricket and football. The most reliable accounts of the academic and sporting achievements of these institutions may be extracted from the school magazines. Oftentimes, pages would be covered with well articulated reports of the school matches, together with typically eulogistic character portraits of the leading athletes.

The influence of the military in the development of Canadian sport is well recognized. The non-hostile nature of the times coupled with the character of the personnel, were important determinants in the direction that sport in nineteenth century Canada was to move. At a time when commissions in the army were bought, it would appear that many of the officers of the British military garrisons had themselves attended the English “public” schools. Their contribution was to include the annual fixtures between the garrison and the community and between the garrison and the private schools. The help that the officers gave in terms of coaching the school teams and in the development of a physical training curriculum, comprising of military drill, calisthenics and gymnastics, was to have a longlasting influence upon the sporting tradition of the nation.

The foundations of Canadian sport were indeed partially set in the halls of the great English “public” school. Although the face of sport in Canada later changed to meet the needs of a more resonant, excitable society, there remained an ideal of moral value that has since permeated the labyrinth of Canadian Amateur Sport.