
To Preserve, Protect and Play: Sporting Pursuits of the Imperial Forces in British North America

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During the British colonial period, British military personnel stationed in the Canadas and the Maritimes were vital to the defense of the territory and the preservation of the new society. Perhaps far more important than their stalwart defensive posture, however, was their social impact on the fledgling colony. Sport particularly was honourably preserved and defended until their departure in 1871. The impact of the involvement of the British Army in

Canadian sport was largely affected by the roles played by the troops in Canada and the characteristics of the military personnel themselves.

Periods of military unrest, when British garrison troops were diverted to either preserve or protect Imperial interests in the colony, punctuated the years during which they served in British North America. The amount of leisure time realized by the troops was a reflection of these periods. When called upon to suppress a rebellion, as was the case in 1837, or to defend Canadian territory, as occurred in 1812, leisure time was severely curtailed.

Daily garrison duties were diverse and arduous, and required much of the troops' time. Guard duty, daily muster and drill, artillery and ball practice, reviews, sham-fights, fatigues and firefighting were several of the duties which influenced the amount of leisure time available to army personnel.

Sporting pursuits were often determined by the character and lifestyle of the troops. The portrait of other ranks which is most commonly documented is one of drunkenness, crime, and desertion. During this period in the history of the British Army, enlistment was considered to be one of the most celebrated types of social welfare then in vogue. Recruits were encouraged by drink, with the result being a flood of disciplinary problems which constantly plagued station commanders. Sporting pastimes became the exception rather than the rule. Officers were of another breed. They were well-educated men of substance, whose military careers were as successful as their ability to purchase commissions. These gentlemen were looked upon by Canadians to promote those things British in the growing colony. Their presence was especially felt in the social life of the garrison communities, notably when sporting events were held. The educational background of these men, specifically at the public schools, embraced muscular Christianity and thus the attendant sports were familiar to them. In Canada, their lifestyle was largely leisure-oriented and as a result of their British sporting heritage, Canadian sport was significantly enlivened.

The sporting interests of the officer corps was exemplified in the long term concern of various military authors regarding the army's philosophy pertaining to sports and physical education. Nineteenth century military publications contained numerous publications aimed at inculcating a spirit of athleticism throughout the ranks. The immediate result was the introduction of sports legislation by the War Office in Great Britain, which eventually filtered down to stations throughout the Empire. Sports equipment, facilities, and requirements were regularly legislated.

The actual involvement of the Imperial forces in Canadian sport was influenced by several factors. First, the geographical setting would either promote or discourage certain activities. For example, the natural hydrography of Halifax would suggest the popularity of aquatic pastimes. The harsh Canadian winter was a boon to sport. Regular duties were relaxed and thus more leisure time was realized. Necessary military equipment, such as horses, was often utilized to furnish soldiers with readily available sport. The result was the constant military involvement in a collage of sport, practiced during every season of the year.

The social interaction of work and sport was finely honed by British military personnel in British North America. Sport served a definite purpose in the lives of Imperial officers and, to a lesser extent, other ranks. Owing to the degree of social interaction between the military and the local citizens, these pastimes were indeed significant in moulding the complete portrait of Canadian sport.