

The North West Mounted Police and Their Influence on Sport in Western Canada, 1873-1905

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On July 15th, 1870, the North West was officially handed over to the Dominion of Canada by the Hudson's Bay Company and the British Government. The government of Canada, led by Sir John A. Macdonald, saw the need to establish law and order in the west before settlers arrived. A bill, creating a force of mounted police, was presented to parliament in April, 1873, and the force was officially constituted on August 30th, 1873.

There was a month to recruit, organize and equip the force, and to get it to Fort Garry before freeze up, where the men were to train throughout the winter. Initially there were 150 recruits. While many of them were Canadians from Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes, a number of the men were immigrants from the British Isles.

The march west proceeded in the spring of 1874. The first N.W.M.P. post was built on the banks of the Old Man's River, and was called Fort McLeod. Fort Calgary, Fort Walsh, Fort Edmonton, and many others soon followed.

The members of the force played different sports as pastimes and, because their numbers were large, they were able to hold team competitions. Later, when the area became more settled, the existence of two or more teams in a community meant that some sports developed before inter-town competition became practical. Because of their background and past experience the men of the N.W.M.P. introduced many sports, including Association football (soccer), rugby, cricket, baseball, polo, track and field, and horse racing.

Team sports and competition brought everyone together, and games were often played in honour of some festive occasion. Cricket was a very popular pastime and was played after Christmas dinner or to celebrate the Queen's birthday. The equipment was often crude and early games were not well organized, but teams emerged all over the west. The game developed into serious competition between the police and the people of the settlements and towns.

The exact date the N.W.M.P. started playing rugby is not clear, but it was probably in 1886. The first inter-town match took place in 1890 when Regina travelled to Winnipeg. The Regina team stayed a week, playing rugby and cricket, and their stay is reported to have resulted in an immediate increase in player participation and public interest in rugby football in southern Manitoba.

Association football (soccer) was played extensively. The first game in Calgary, under Association rules, took place between the N.W.M.P. and local citizens on November 9th, 1883, and by 1898 a tournament held annually in that city attracted teams from a wide area. A league formed in Regina in 1903 consisted of teams from the police, the industrial school, the normal school, high schools, and the city.

Not surprisingly, rifle shooting grew rapidly as a popular sport. The men were equipped with rifles for their march west, and many references are made to target practice. Shooting competitions involved civilians, but most tournaments were won by the police.

Like cricket, baseball was first played with crude equipment, and games often took place on special occasions. At Wild Horse, Saskatchewan, games were arranged with the settlers of Cottonwood, U.S.A., especially for the 4th of July.

The first polo club was established at Fort Mcleod in 1882, with Colonel Mcleod as President. Lacrosse was also played, but accounts are sketchy. The N.W.M.P. formed a club at Fort Mcleod in 1892. Ice hockey, although not as popular as other team sports, was played well before 1900 in Edmonton and at Fort Saskatchewan.

In addition to the many team games there were individual sports where competition was equally keen. For example, references exist to the playing of tennis at Fort Saskatchewan in 1885 and the playing of golf at Fort Mcleod in 1895. One of the most popular events of the period was the sports day. A combination of track and field and horsemanship, this would bring together the police, the white settlers, and the Indian community. There were usually cash prizes for each event, and betting among the spectators was common.

It was inevitable that the arrival of the North West Mounted Police would stimulate early sport competition in Western Canada. A group of young men stationed in one place had ready made teams and individual athletes, eager for competition. It was natural that the settlers would group together and provide that competition. By 1905 when Alberta and Saskatchewan joined the Confederation as separate provinces, sport was flourishing in the west.