

# INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORT

## The Form and Function of Sport at a Canadian University, 1878-1939

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This paper examined the foundations and traditions of sport at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, from 1878 to 1939 with a view toward delineating both the form and the function of sport at that institution. Situated in the heart of agriculturally-rich southwestern Ontario, Western has grown to become London's major industry in terms of employment. Originally established and supported by the Church of England (Anglican), the University Senate voted to become undenominational in 1908. Prior to that date, the form of sport among Western's medical and arts students was almost entirely recreational. Furthermore, all sport was student-organized and controlled in order to serve the needs and interests of the undergraduates. Even in the few extramural contests that were organized, student control was paramount and the contests were always accompanied by social affairs.

The 1908 shift to a ratepayer-supported institution coincided with a dramatic change in the form and function of sport. The clergy-dominated Senate of the University's first three decades was replaced by civic and University officials, and almost immediately intra-city competition in almost all team sports was initiated with University teams. As cap, gown, and town ties grew progressively stronger, athletics mounted a familiar treadmill of evolution. An athletic association was established with strong faculty representation; compulsory athletic fees were levied from the students with no financial input from the University; championships brought press attention to the institution and were recognized by succeeding presidents; municipal facilities were rented using athletic fees' resources at an increasing rate; and greater league representation occurred. In short, the function of sport shifted from general student recreation toward the pursuit of excellence and success.

Between the two world wars, this shift became more pronounced with intercollegiate athletics rising to a position at the University far above intramural sport. Right up to 1939 all intramural sport was left virtually to student initiative. After examining the correspondence of Western's presidents prior to 1939, it is apparent that the administration was enamored with the advertizing potential of successful intercollegiate sport. The financial burden of maintaining intercollegiate teams, however, fell directly on the students. Western even created its own athletic kindergarten for promising high school athletes. From this preliminary investigation into the foundations of sport at one Canadian university, it is suggested that Canadian universities have not been immune to the forces of athletic excellence so heavily decried at American universities.