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# Tom Longboat Reconsidered

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Few athletes have dominated the public consciousness of Canadian sport quite as dramatically as Tom Longboat in the decade before World War I. Yet despite consistently magnificent performances and frequent battles for his services, the native runner has always been considered an athlete manque. Within months of his first triumph, he was accused of neglecting training and dissipating his “natural” fitness on late-night alcoholic binges. Contemporaries claimed that his performances began to slide shortly after he turned professional in 1908. Biographers assert he squandered his earnings “on liquor, fancy clothes and foolish investments” and spent the rest of his life in lonely poverty.

This paper argues that the conventional judgment is an ideological distortion of what Longboat actually did, based on a misunderstanding of the requirements for competitive distance running and a narrow reading of the contemporary record. Longboat did train intelligently, but he liked to conduct his own workouts and such independence cost him the support of the white sports leaders who refused to believe he could manage his own affairs. He did frequent taverns, but that was an occupational requirement for all professional distance runners of his day. His arrests for “drunkenness” were complicated by the criminal code provisions which made it an offence for a native simply to purchase a drink. Despite “tales of his drinking”, there is no evidence that he was ever incapacitated for a race by alcohol. In his later years there is firm evidence that another Indian

frequently begged for drinks in his name. After he retired from professional racing, Longboat was neither lonely nor penniless. He held a steady job, supported a large family in a comfortable neighborhood of Toronto, and entertained friends regularly.

The conventional judgment about Longboat is primarily based on the recollections of two men, Tom Flanagan and Lou Marsh, who sought to enhance their own importance at Longboat's expense. In each of the controversies in which Longboat was involved, there were others who took Longboat's side, but these supporters, and the circumstances which Longboat faced, are rarely taken into account. The defense of Longboat is based on a wider reading of contemporary newspapers and club records, interviews with men who knew him, and an analysis of the racism he faced and the practices of the distance runners he raced.