

# The Athletic War in Canada: Conflict and Sisyphean Resolution, 1906-1909

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This paper examined the causes behind, the issues inherent in and the ultimate resolution of the “athletic war” in Canadian sport that occurred between 1906 and 1909. The Canadian conflict was engendered by problems in amateur sport control and regulation. In

many ways, the athletic war in Canada was similar to one that occurred in the United States between 1886 and 1888 when the New York Athletic Club initiated a split with the National Association of Amateur Athletes of America and formed, ultimately, the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States.

Canada borrowed its nineteenth century amateur distinctions from the social exclusiveness of British amateurism amalgamated with the legalistic, negative, non-amateur definitions of the United States. Strict policing of amateur distinctions was perceived as the only viable method to combat the dreaded "shamateur" or professional who at that time was characterized as a prostitute/athlete who would sell his talents to the highest bidder. Fix sporting contests and generally destroy the middle class ideals of sport and fair play. By the turn of the century, "professionalism," especially in team sports, meant better quality athletes and better competition for all concerned. Prevailing amateur exclusivity, based on nineteenth century professional and non amateur concepts, forbade amateurs from competing with or against professionals under the rules of the Canadian Amateur Athletic Union (C.A.A.U.)

Change came from and was precipitated by the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association (M.A.A.A.). Montreal sporting groups believed the only way to handle the problems of amateurism, was to acknowledge the professional openly and to allow amateurs to remain amateurs while competing with and/or against professionals. Cognitive dissonance to this concept was too strong for amateur idealists in the C.A.A.U. On February 1, 1907, the M.A.A.A. and other Montreal clubs broke off from the C.A.A.U. and founded the Amateur Athletic Federation Canada (A.A.F. of C.) The athletic war began officially with the formation of the Federation and was protracted through two and a half years over the amateurs with and/or against professionals issue.

Squabbles over athletic eligibility raged between the Toronto-based C.A.A.U. and the Montreal-centered A.A.F. of C. The C.A.A.U. actively recruited to become national in scope and representation while the Federation adopted an arrogant, come-to-us policy bolstered by A.A.U. of the U.S. affiliation. The turning point in the conflict came when the Federation broke an Olympic truce declared between the C.A.A.U. and the A.A.F. of C. for the good of Canadian Olympic athletes; the Federation and the A.A. U. of U.S. protested the amateur eligibility of Tom Longboat, a C.A.A.U. certified amateur marathon runner. The protest was not allowed by the British Olympic Committee and Canadians, buoyed by the public press, were outraged at the Federation's protest.

Under the obstinate leadership of the M.A.A.A., the Federation refused to back down on its compromised amateur definition until late in 1909 when an athletic peace finally was negotiated. The terms of the peace showed very minor concessions to the Federation, the disbanding of the two rival governing bodies and the creation of a new Amateur Athletic Union of Canada. In effect, the resolution placed Canadian amateur sport back on its nineteenth century footing. The outcome of the athletic war was not a turn from but a return to the outdated amateur ideals of the 1800s. While a significant point of conflict in the evolution of Canadian sport, the athletic war was Sisyphean; the result was a fruitless and ineffective as Sisyphus' task to roll a stone uphill in Hades, only to have the stone roll back down for him to begin the task anew in perpetuity.