

Sport At The Fair: The Evolution Of Vancouver's Exhibition Association As A Promoter Of Urban Sport

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Vancouver's annual exhibition, held since 1910 as an agricultural and industrial fair, has always played an important role in the promotion of amateur and professional sport. The exhibition association not only needed and used sports activities to attain its principal objectives, but also in time was transformed into a facilities-management organization, with sports as an important component. For most of the past seventy-five years, Exhibition Park has been the sports centre of the Greater Vancouver region.

Sports were promoted through a variety of facilities. The racetrack was the site of thoroughbred racing; as well as track and field, lacrosse, and soccer on an athletic field inside the main track. Vancouver's first public golf course was built as a means of expanding land holdings for later building construction. Exhibition Forum, built in 1930 as a facility for exhibitions, was converted each winter into an ice arena for hockey, curling, and skating. With this building, the Exhibition Association became increasingly involved with revenue-producing, year-round use of its facilities, for the maintenance of buildings and the repayment of building loans and sports proved to be the most effective way of using these buildings. From 1930 onwards, indoor tennis, badminton, basketball, boxing, and wrestling were also accommodated at Exhibition Park. In 1942, a fully-developed athletic field adjacent to the Park was donated to the Exhibition, and supported lacrosse, softball, baseball, and soccer.

In 1954, the British Empire and Commonwealth Games were held in Vancouver and Empire Stadium for track and field was constructed at Exhibition Park; for by now, the Exhibition Board of Directors, and the city as a whole, looked upon Exhibition Park as the logical location for such facilities. As a result, a professional football team, the Canadian Football League BC Lions, made Empire Stadium its home. That same year, the Exhibition Association had acquired one-half (and later, full) ownership of a Western Hockey League hockey team, the Vancouver Canucks, and began to lobby for a better ice arena. This increasing involvement of an agricultural exhibition association with sports promotion began to draw critical notice, and attempts to obtain funds for a new sports facility were not initially successful. However, by the 1960s, the Exhibition had acquired a full-sized arena and a National Hockey League team. The facility also accommodated tennis, basketball, and indoor track. In the 1970s, a North American Soccer League team joined the ranks of professional sports operating out of Exhibition Park.

In the 1960s and '70s, several events involving sports and local residents resulted in strained relations with the community in which Exhibition Park was located, and a severe loss of autonomy for the Exhibition Association. In 1982, an inquiry board was established, and the future of the annual fair is very much in doubt. The loss of these facilities would be a

serious blow for sport in Greater Vancouver, for the region has, over the years, come to depend upon them for a significant part of its public sports activities.

The contribution of its Exhibition to the history of sport in Vancouver is significant. If this is typical of the development of modern urban sport, then the examination of sport at the fair should be accorded a more prominent place in sport history.



The session on Sports Promoters was moderated by George Kirsch and included as speaker\ Don Mrozek, Barbara Schrodt, and Steve Hardy.