

The North West Mounted Police Force and the Development of Rugby Football in Western Canada 1873-1908

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Rugby football was introduced to Canada mainly by British settlers and garrisoned troops in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It's popularity gradually increased in the larger centers of population and the game was taken up by several educational institutions, notably Trinity College and Upper Canada College of Toronto. In British Columbia and the Maritime Provinces the Royal Navy helped generate interest in the sport. In the North West, which became part of the Dominion of Canada in 1870, the development of rugby was greatly influenced by the North West Mounted Police Force.

Formed on August 30th, 1873 to establish law and order in the newly acquired territory, the N.W.M.P. quickly established a network of barracks that were the foundation stone for many of the first settlements. Before the large influx of settlers that began in the 1890's, the police played rugby amongst themselves and on occasions with the native Indians. As settlements increased, the N.W.M.P. began to arrange fixtures with local teams. In 1890 a team from the Regina Division travelled to Winnipeg and played the local teams at rugby and cricket. In the same year the game was introduced to Calgary. In 1891 Lethbridge and Ft. Macleod saw their first games and the police also introduced the sport to Edmonton, Fort Saskatchewan and Battleford.

Many of these developments were due to the work of Commissioner L. W. Herchmer, who took command of the N. W. M. P. in 1886. Herchmer was particularly concerned about the reputation and morale of the police force and he was quick to realize the significance of

sporting contests with local civilians in improving public relations and boosting troop morale. Several of the men under his command already knew the game. A considerable number were educated in the English public schools where rugby flourished and others had been exposed to it during their Eastern Canadian upbringing.

By the late 1890's several clubs had been formed in the North West, and occasional fixtures were played, notably between teams from Calgary and Edmonton. The police maintained their interest and the N.W.M.P. Depot Division in Winnipeg were largely responsible for the formation of the Manitoba and Northwest Territories Rugby Union. Newspaper reports of rugby matches during the period show that police officers often figured prominently in the local teams that emerged. The involvement of the N.W.M.P. in rugby led to a healthy growth in public interest and participation throughout Western Canada. These groups of young men stationed in the area were eager for sporting competition which provided a welcome break from the hardships of police life. Their background meant that many were already familiar with rugby football and were ideally suited to the task of introducing the sport into the area. Spurred on by their interest and involvement, local rugby teams emerged and by 1905 the sport was popular in all the major settlements of Western Canada.