

# Common Players, Common Goals: Sport and Working-Class Identity in Kingston, Ontario 1880–1890

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Until the 1960’s working-class history received scant attention being overshadowed by what were considered as more significant and grandiose topics. Only in that decade did a new breed of historian recognize the salience of the worker to history. Sport history has also passed through similar stages of neglect to assume its role as a mature historical field rooted in the socio-cultural-political context. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that sport history and labour history would eventually come together.

This paper explored the possibilities inherent in the labour/sports history relationship. Specifically it examined the role of sport in the formation and maintenance of a working-class identity in the period 1880-1890. Four broad issues served as the foci for the study; the correlation between the working-class and sport in terms of neighbourhood and spatial considerations; the class divisions within sport and within individual sports; how sport and class constitute one another in terms of language and the political economy of sport in terms of consumption and production,

During the decade of the 1880’s Kingston graduated toward a modern industrial economy and there was a concurrent development of an organized working-class response to industrial capitalism. Paralleling these changes was an increase in participation and the “democratization” of sport. A comparison between participants in 1880 and 1890 indicates that during the decade sport had moved from an elitist to an egalitarian orientation, and that the working-class were no longer excluded.

While the study adopted a Marxian definition of the concept of class it did not find evidence to wholeheartedly support the conflict theory of sport. In the 1880’s the development of sport and recreation were conducted by the minions of capitalism and the increase of commercialism and materialism were factors that prompted sport as a product to be consumed. Yet sport was also a source of inspiration for the working-class. Baseball provided an opportunity by which men of working-class origins could stake a claim for physical self-importance. Thus, common values were reinforced and identity was forged from mutually supportive attitudes and activities.