

Lacrosse in British Columbia Prior to World War I: A Case Study of Sport in an Emerging Urban Setting

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In the years prior to World War I, and following several decades of control by teams from Montreal and Ontario, field lacrosse in Canada came to be dominated by teams from British Columbia. Lacrosse was introduced into Vancouver in 1886, and by 1890, that city had joined with Victoria and New Westminster in forming the British Columbia Amateur Lacrosse Association. For the next eighteen years, the teams from these cities became stronger, and lacrosse became the most popular spectator team sport in the region. Stadiums were built in Vancouver and New Westminster that accommodated the many thousands of highly-partisan spectators that flocked to important matches on the new interurban railway.

As lacrosse became more professionalized, and as the demands grew for success at the national level, the three cities addressed the problem of player recruitment and team development in quite different ways. Although Victoria had been the leading lacrosse city for many years, with a major tour of Central Canada in 1893, that city lacked the financial resources to entice players from the

East, and reluctantly withdrew when the provincial senior competition became professional in 1908. From that time onward, Victoria was a major amateur lacrosse center.

New Westminster won the Minto Cup, emblematic of the Canadian professional championship, in 1908. Following this victory, and with the exception of only two years, the New Westminster "Salmonbellies" held that championship until the mid-1930s, when field lacrosse was no longer contested in Canada. New Westminster achieved this level of development through a combination of: financial support from local businessmen, prominent players enticed to the West by the promise of jobs, loyal support from the small population of the city of New Westminster, and a strong feeder system of junior and intermediate clubs.

After 1908, Vancouver was the only team to defeat New Westminster for the Minto Cup. A very strong lacrosse city, and always able to give New Westminster a close game, Vancouver was the most professionalized of the British Columbia teams. In 1909, the new team manager, Con Jones, began a concerted campaign to defeat their rivals, by hiring outstanding players from Central Canada. This strategy was finally successful in 1911, when Vancouver emerged victorious after a close Minto Cup series. However, unlike the New Westminster players who tended to make that city their permanent home, the Vancouver imports returned to their Central Canada homes at the end of the lacrosse season, and Jones was never again able to assemble a team strong enough to defeat New Westminster.

The principal factor in the successful development of senior lacrosse in British Columbia was the fierce inter-city rivalry between the three main lacrosse cities, in their quest for socio-economic dominance in that province. Supported by the local newspapers in each city and by the very large and often violent crowds, the sport of lacrosse became a measure of civic worth, as each city vied for the provincial lacrosse championship. The opportunities provided by the lacrosse matches against Eastern teams at the annual New Westminster Agricultural Fair gave British Columbia teams additional funds and important experience. Later, as these and other contests demonstrated that the Western teams were of national championship caliber, spectators increased in numbers, and provided even more moral and financial support. The monies generated from the large crowds in attendance at crucial games enabled British Columbia teams to hire Eastern imports at very lucrative salaries.

Once the Minto Cup came to British Columbia, it became less of a financial burden to defend it; all challenges were played at the home of the Cup holder, and the huge crowds generated even more money for the home teams. In this way, large salaries continued to be paid, success on the field was facilitated, and the economic base became self-sustaining.

When the combined efforts of players, promoters, and spectators finally resulted in New Westminster's first Minto Cup championship, this was a victory for other major lacrosse cities of British Columbia, as well. As part of a generalized growth pattern in Western Canadian urban centers prior to World War I, new cities strove to acquire the characteristics of the urban East, and organized sport was one important urban constituent of the Eastern cities that the West could easily emulate. Thus, lacrosse became not only a vehicle for the development of civic spirit, but also a measure of a community's maturity. In that sense, New Westminster and Vancouver came of age when they won the Minto cup.