

# MULTICULTURALISMS AND HISTORY

## Nova Scotian Sport —The Black Experience

A.J. “Sandy” Young

Dalhousie University

Slavery existed in Nova Scotia before the big Loyalist immigration in 1783-84; but the 1200 slaves who were part of this move were the real test. Slavery quickly proved to be unprofitable. By the time the British abolished slavery in 1833, none could be found in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotian Blacks were nonetheless no more “equal” than were Black-Americans.

Changes in Black/White relations which took place in Nova Scotia parallel those in the United States in that early disdain gave way to subtle discrimination which gave way to official equality which, in recent years is becoming real equality aided by affirmative action, led in no small part by coaches recruiting black athletes.

Differences are primarily based on the very strong influence of the Baptist Church in N.S. wherein the church aggressively dominated Black society but were passive in their dealings with the White establishment. Black Nova Scotians were not so much held down as ignored. The changes which did occur in Nova Scotia were nonconfrontational and therefore left White society feeling less fearful and less resentful.

It is difficult to study early prejudicial practice anywhere, because biased practice does not make itself known in print until someone feels confident enough and has the outlet to complain about it. If it is safe to assume that things are slowly improving for Black Nova Scotians, then it becomes sensible to start at the beginning of public complaint and assume that things before that time were at least that bad.

As late as 1949, sociologist Ruth Wilson described Canadian prejudice against Blacks as varying in the same degrees as the patterns in Mississippi and New York. She pointed to Nova Scotia as the province with the greatest concentration of Blacks and also the one that suffered the most discrimination.

Through the 1960s Whites could live their lives without encountering Blacks and vice versa. Whites thought of Blacks as being God-fearing, inferior and “cute”. Write-ups on Black sport treated the subject as it did play and games for women and children.

Early white “athletic days” would include special races for “coloured boys” or “MicMac Squaws”. These continued until 1904. Black churches and athletic clubs would hold athletic days with races, tug-of-war, etc. There were also “coloured leagues” as early as the mid nineteenth century in baseball and hockey. Baseball historian, Colin Howell, found that 15% of the baseball teams in 19th century Nova Scotia were Black; but inter-racial teams were almost non-existent. Some White teams had Black players by the 1920s—all were integrated by the 1930s.

Black Nova Scotian women, with one notable and a few minor exceptions, don’t compete in serious competitive sport. A combination of church attitudes and sexist practices are certainly part of

the explanation (Hamilton, 1990). Only seven Black female athletes have played at the university level in Nova Scotia.

Julie Barton is a young table tennis star who has competed internationally; but the only other Black Nova Scotian female to have done so was Marjorie Turner. Turner managed, through sheer individual determination, to overcome unemployment, single parenthood, years of chronic injuries, and government apathy, to become a Canadian champion and an Olympic track participant.

For Black Nova Scotian men, there is no debate as to which sport has produced the most success. Nova Scotian boxers have achieved international renown, though they invariably had to leave home to do it. Despite societal mores which did nothing to encourage them, the seemingly uncontrollable "need" of boxing fans, to see who was really the best in boxing, allowed the really talented Blacks to achieve far beyond the success possible elsewhere.

In 1894, less than three years after Naismith had invented the game, basketball was being played in Amherst, N.S. (Mitchelson, 1970, p. 9) and Halifax (*Acadian Recorder*, November 27, 1894). The Halifax "Y" had an eight team "House" league by 1895 (*Daily Echo*, January 17, 1895), offering both junior and senior basketball (*Evening Mail*, January 19, 1895) and by 1908, a City Senior League was formed. It was won by the YMCA, when they beat Dalhousie 29-12 (*Acadian Recorder*, March 13, 1908). Many Nova Scotia Black men have excelled in university basketball.

Behind basketball in participation numbers is football, a sport which is only played in a handful of high schools. Blacks started to appear in small numbers at Queen Elizabeth High School, Halifax, in the 1960's. While many in recent years have gone on to successfully play university football, the only Black Nova Scotian to go on to play professional football was Wayne Smith. As much as Blacks delighted in his success, he didn't serve as the kind of role-model educators wanted because he never attended high school.

Only eight Black Nova Scotians graduated from Nova Scotian universities before 1950. University education appeared to be unattainable to most Nova Scotian Black athletes until local coaches started recruiting them. In the 1980s the *Black Incentive fund* began providing money to for any Black student who had managed to attain a seventy-five percent average, and gain acceptance to a university.

The number of Black students both matriculating and graduating from university however, continues to grow. There are now local Black students in both the medical schools and the law schools at Dalhousie University. Role models abound with more and more Nova Scotian Blacks succeeding athletically and professionally. It would be wrong to imply that race relations in Nova Scotia is less than complex.