

The Myth of the Hero in Canadian Sport History

Don Morrow

University of Western Ontario

This paper examines the relationship between the timeless, mythological process of the hero and its manifestation in Canadian sport. Specifically, the paper draws extensively upon the work of renowned mythologist, Joseph Campbell to determine the nature and process of the heroic journey in comparison to the development of the hero in Canadian sport. For comparison purposes over time, five world champion, Canadian “heroes” were selected: Ned Hanlan (oarsman), Louis Cyr (weightlifter), Tom Longboat (long distance runner), Percy Williams (sprinter), and Barbara Ann Scott (figure skater). Through an examination of the monomyth paradigm, that is, the three-stage journey of the mythological hero from Departure through Initiation through Return, it was determined that sport heroes are synthetic in that they fall short of being truly heroic. Sport heroes are carriers only of our projected needs for heroism in a modern society addicted to science and devoid, for the most part, of any sense of mystery and symbol. Myth is characterized as an essential system of basic metaphors, images and stories that *in-forms* the perceptions, memories and aspirations of a people rather than the more conventional perspective of myth as a purely fictitious story. The basic western myths of the value of the marketplace and the romantic myth are related to the sporting myth as pure illusion, pure surrender to unnecessary obstacles. Athletic perfection has become the modern grail-quest. The sport hero’s journey falls short of the fully heroic process of the mythological hero’s journey, even though the former’s journey *appears* to be the same on the surface. It would seem that sport has created a new mythology that does not have the same significance or rootedness of the original or conventional mythologies of heroism. We have re-mythologized the process through sport.