

# “Strictly Honorable Races: Driving Park Associations and Nineteenth Century Small Town Sporting Holidays.”

Nancy B. Bouchier  
Kansas State University

In 1871 a dozen men formed a Driving Park Association for the urban and rural populations of the small town of Woodstock in Oxford County, Ontario. They reformed the popular traditional sport of horseracing through establishing what they termed “strictly honorable races” in their attempt to make their own particular vision of reality credible. Politically and socially active men headed this reform effort; as a group organized an impressive array of local voluntary organizations, social reform agencies, and fraternal organizations. Predominantly Ontario-born, middle-aged, upper-middle class Protestants, Association men were a solid local elite.

Under Association leadership Woodstock became well known in provincial horse circles. Scientific horse breeding, and strict behavioral limitations for riders and spectators, implicitly made Association races appear as a rationally-oriented activities at the expense of rowdier horse racing traditions. The Association also made a tremendous impact upon the nature and structure of civic holidays. Throughout the 1870’s it took advantage of the half-day most citizens had off from work by holding their annual spring races on the May 24th celebration of the Queen’s Birthday and the July 1st Dominion Day holiday. The Association was the first organization to formally organize civic holiday activities for Woodstock’s urban and rural populations.

Even so, regardless of whatever merit their line of reasoning held, Association attempts to rationalize the sport of horseracing produced a quagmire for the holiday venue. The social and moral issues surrounding horseracing, consistently split, rather than unified local society. Horseracing’s prominence as a civic holiday sport died out with the rise of other sports which much more successfully mediated socially contested terrains. In the final analysis, horses and horse interests held no role in symbolic representations of the town leaders’ visions of their urban corporate community. Horseracing was problematic for them. On the one hand, sport reformers were acutely aware that horses do not display human moral character. On the other hand, while they were willing to attempt to rationalize and control the sport, Driving Park reformers were not willing to (nor perhaps could they) eschew the sport’s commercialization. By 1882 horseracing diverged from civic community celebrations, replaced by team sports offered by Amateur Athletic Associations which embraced the well articulated muscular Christian sport ideology that games build character.

Yet sport and holiday reformers still had to make some concessions if they were to successfully create a public consensus acceptable to their urban as well as rural constituencies. What emerged was a bifurcation: horseracing left the arena of civic holiday celebration for the forum of the agricultural fair, while organized amateur team sport came to dominate civic holidays. Despite this, although the coalition of interests best denoted as the urbane Victorian middle class won the battle for local cultural supremacy through projecting their particular visions of reality, it was neither a complete, nor a truly coherent, victory. Turf reformers and team sport reformers alike—two variations of this

same theme—found that their efforts to sublimate and marginalize alternate traditions remained an ongoing process.