

Minor Leagues, Major Leagues, and the World Series: Professional Baseball and Canadian Culture, 1920-1929

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The national excitement generated in Canada by the World Series champion Toronto Blue Jays illustrates the prominence of baseball in modern Canadian culture. While baseball has often been described as the “national pastime” of the United States, it is apparent that the diamond sport also occupies a significant position in the sporting life of Canada. The earliest documented evidence of baseball being played in Canada dates back to 1838--one year before the game’s mythic founding by Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, New York. A distinctive regional variation of baseball thrived in parts of Ontario until the 1850s. By 1900, baseball was probably the most popular sport in Canada. However, the relationship between baseball and Canadian popular culture in the twentieth century is a topic that remains largely unexplored by historians.

This paper looks at one crucial stage in the development of that “American” national game in Canada--the place of professional baseball in Canadian popular culture between 1920 and 1929. It explores the relationship between baseball in Canadian popular culture between baseball and Canadian culture at a time when Canada had no major league teams and television ‘did not bring games into the country’s living rooms. Canadians experienced professional baseball through minor league franchises based in Canada and media reports of big league games in the United States. This study investigates the historical roots of the diamond sport’s cultural identity in Canada by examining the cultural implications of Canadian involvement in professional baseball during the 1920s.

This paper also assesses the significance of baseball as an indicator of American cultural influence in the early twentieth century. During the inter-war period, Canadian intellectual leaders sought to develop an indigenous cultural tradition that reflected Canada’s growing self-confidence and independence. This emphasis on creating a distinctively Canadian culture produced a surge in Canadian cultural nationalism. However, as Canadian artists, writers, and musicians attempted to define the country’s cultural identity, American movies, magazines, and radio programs found large audiences in Canada. This paper examines the popularity of baseball in the context of the invasion of American mass culture in the 1920s and assesses the extent to which baseball can be regarded as a cultural import from the United States in this period.

In the period between 1920 and 1929, baseball was one of the cultural forces--like American movies, magazines, and radio programs--that seemed to be drawing Canada closer to the United States. Canadian baseball’s rules, leagues, players, and major events were overwhelmingly American. As a result, baseball contributed to the intrusion of American symbols, heroes, and ideas into Canadian life. However, baseball cannot be used as a simple and direct measure of the impact of the United States on Canadian culture. To state that professional baseball in the 1920s was simply an American cultural import is to ignore the fact that cultural rituals associated with baseball had been part of Canadian life for more than a century. It also denies the contributions of Canadian entrepreneurs and Canadian fans to the game’s vitality. Baseball’s long-standing cultural significance in Canada makes it a North American game--not just an American game. More than any other sport--and to a greater degree than most other general cultural practices--baseball is ingrained in the popular culture of both the United States and Canada. Baseball drew Canadians into a continental culture and blurred the cultural distinctions between Canadians and Americans in the 1920s. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that baseball was also undeniably part of what it meant to be Canadian.