

GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY AWARD

A Lively Interest on the Prairies: Western Canada, The Mass Media, and a World of Sport, 1870-1939

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Before the birth of television and the spread of professional sports franchises across the continent, many people in North America did not have the opportunity to watch high-level sporting performances regularly, if at all. Nevertheless, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the mass media was able to bring powerful representations of sporting events to people who were unable to view them first-hand. Canadian sports fans could not see heavyweight title fights or the World Series, for instance, but they could still experience distant boxing matches and baseball games through newspapers, telegraph reenactments, and radio. As a result, people's experience of sports was no longer limited to local athletes, clubs, and events. A broad-based community of interest tied together by sport arose in Canada and the United States. This community of interest was made up of people who discussed, cared about, and paid attention to the same players, teams, leagues, and events, no matter where they lived. A unified *world of sport* had been created by the media - one that embraced amateur and professional sports, and included leagues, games, teams, athletes, events, statistics, stories, myths, and heroes. This *world of sport* can also be thought of as a shared pool of "information" about sport - "information" meaning not only news and factual data, but the entire range of ideas, attitudes, symbols, and knowledge that constitutes the common experience of sport.

This paper explores the relationship between sport, the mass media, and popular culture by examining how people on the Canadian Prairies experienced this *world of sport* between 1870 and 1939. With the rise of mass circulation newspapers, the telegraph, and radio, people across North America gained access to a shared body of information about sport. Through the media, Western Canadians therefore became involved in a *world of sport* that extended across provincial and national boundaries. At the same time, this *world of sport* also occupied a prominent position in the emerging national popular cultures of both Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century. As a result, this study also assesses the relationship between an emerging *world of sport* and an emerging Canadian national popular culture in this time period.

This paper gives particular attention to the various ways in which people on the Canadian prairies experienced major league baseball and the National Hockey League. For instance, during the 1920s and 1930s reports of World Series games were on the front page of daily papers in every city in Western Canada. Across the prairies, crowds gathered in front of newspaper offices to watch games charted on model diamonds, while an announcer with a megaphone described the action from telegraph reports. In addition, Western Canadians listened to World Series broadcasts on the radio. Similarly, during the interwar period, people in Western Canada read about professional hockey in the daily press, gathered outside telegraph offices for updates of NHL games, and listened to *Hockey Night in Canada* radio broadcasts on Saturday evenings. In fact, because *Hockey Night in Canada* was one of the first radio programs to reach a national audience, NHL hockey broadcasts were milestone events in the development of both a *world of sport* and a Canadian national popular culture.

Through shared media experiences of major sporting events, people in the prairie West were attached to an imagined community of fans who followed high-level national and international competition, and to an imagined national community of Canadians. Hockey, for instance, contributed significantly to the development of an awareness of a larger Canadian community in the early twentieth century. No other cultural practice could match *Hockey Night in Canada* broadcasts as a vehicle for bringing large numbers of Canadians together on a regular basis. On the other hand, sporting events like baseball's World Series intensified the links between the emerging Canadian and American national popular cultures in the interwar years. In sum, the *world of sport* helped to create national cultural meanings for sport in Canada while, at the same time, contributing to the development of a continental sporting culture.

By forging a unified world of sport in North America, the mass media undercut the importance of locale and region in shaping people's experiences. When sports information was able to flow across great distances and spill over regional and national boundaries, where people had much less to do with what they knew and experienced. Geographic barriers broke down; people everywhere in North America began to share a common experience of sport. A hockey game in Boston mattered to someone in Calgary; a Babe Ruth home run was noted in Saskatoon as well as in New York. As a result, sport transcended local meanings and identities, and drew Western Canadians into a national - even continental - popular culture.