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***A Matter of Class: The Socio-Economic Status
of Baseball and Cricket Players in
Fredericton and Saint John, 1869-1891***

Baseball and cricket in Fredericton and Saint John began as sports to be played and enjoyed by the ‘respectable’ citizens of these two cities. and both games retained through the nineteenth century a degree of popularity among such people. In Saint John, however, baseball was also able to capture the imagination of the less ‘respectable.’ At first they were welcome, as it was hoped that their adoption of this middle-class sport would assist in their adoption of middle-class values. Baseball, as a result. did become an egalitarian sport—in terms of class—as characterized by Albert G. Spalding, with even professional players being adopted by middle-class sportsmen. It was soon realized,

however, that baseball did not promote middle-class values, but by then it had become the game of the people, working and middle class alike.

This finding is not entirely consistent with the efforts of Melvin Adelman and George Kirsch, among others, who have demonstrated that baseball as played in New York/Brooklyn and Philadelphia was not egalitarian. Each of their studies, however, halts short of an openly professional era, although a few players were occasionally paid surreptitiously for their efforts. Saint John baseball, as played by the working-class Irish Catholic Shamrocks and the middle-class English Protestant Nationals, was played at an openly professional level from 1887 to 1890, and it is during this period that baseball became egalitarian. Prior to this period, baseball, like cricket, was not egalitarian. In Fredericton, throughout the study, baseball and cricket were never played at an egalitarian level, despite Fredericton's adoption of an openly professional team in 1889 and 1890.

In the present study, the socio-economic and class components of baseball and cricket in Fredericton and Saint John are determined by both narrative and quantitative means. The narrative component uses period newspapers to look at the rivalry between the St. John Shamrocks and the St. John Nationals. These two teams represented differing ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and class backgrounds. The former two elements served to facilitate a rivalry that brought a very high level of baseball play to Saint John. The class differences between the two teams resulted in a termination of the rivalry in 1890, however, as the Nationals refused further play once they realized that the social cost of successfully competing with the Shamrocks was damage to their middle-class sensibilities.

The quantitative component examines the baseball and cricket players of Fredericton and Saint John in 1869-1875, 1876-1885, and 1886-1891 by eliciting the occupations of players using newspaper box scores and the city directories. These occupations are then given a job score as determined by the continuous distribution socio-economic index devised by Albert J. Reiss, Jr. Upon these determinations a t-test was performed to question whether a significant difference in socio-economic status existed between the two sports, between the sports of the two cities, and across time. Saint John baseball players 1886-1891 were the exceptional group in the study, having a socio-economic status lower than that of Saint John baseball players 1869-1875 and 1876-1885, Fredericton baseball players 1886-1891, Saint John cricket players 1886-1891, and equal to that of a sample drawn from the manuscript census for Saint John 1891.

This result, coupled with the Nationals' loss of hegemony in their competition with the Shamrocks during the late 1880s demonstrates that baseball in Saint John did in fact become the egalitarian sport acclaimed by Spalding and since refuted by Adelman and Kirsch. This suggests that Spalding's promotions may not have been as far wrong as historians have proposed, and also advances the idea that the middle-class adoption of openly professional play may have contributed to their loss of hegemony in the sport.