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Baseball, Biking, and Bowling in the Forest City (London, Ontario) 1868 - 1903

Examination of the history of sport in late nineteenth century North American cities has suggested that sporting clubs served to create a sense of cohesion between like individuals from similar social and economic backgrounds. Sport clubs served to maintain this exclusivity by limiting participation in organized sport to these same individuals. Similarly, sport, leisure, and recreation organizations located in urban centers were organized in a manner that promoted specific social, political, and economic values that were shared by members of the social sporting clubs. The process through which sport and sport clubs came to be institutions was evident in the city of London, Ontario during the late nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth century. The clubs that organized the sports of baseball, cycling, and lawn bowling in London were representative of and provide insight into the process of the institutionalization of sport in the city. By the turn of the twentieth century, commercial and private social sporting organizations were examples of leisure and recreation bodies that had been transformed through the process of institutionalization to become legitimized bodies that both shaped and reinforced the way in which Londoners experienced sport.

The decision to examine baseball, cycling and lawn bowling organizations in London is based upon the sports' representation of the types of activities that took place therein during the second half of the nineteenth century. For each sport there was, initially, one dominant club that organized, standardized, and operationalized the sport in the city. Over time.

these clubs came to be recognized as the legitimate proprietors of the sport in the city. Therefore, these sport bodies were recognized not only as the natural organizers of their specific activities, but also of all sport in the city.

One of the earliest formally organized sport clubs in London was the Tecumseh Baseball Club. Formed in 1868, the constitution of this club is the first on record in the city and represents the starting point for this investigation. Baseball in London in the 1870s attracted players and supporters from a broader social and economic spectrum. The brief experiment with professional baseball in London from 1876-1878 resulted in the rejection of the sport by elite citizens due to concerns over gambling and the moral character of the players. The brief existence of the Tecumseh Baseball Club provides evidence of a popular sport that failed to generate interest among many wealthier Londoners after the 1870s although it remained the most popular activity participated in by London's working class men.

The Forest City Bicycle Club was founded in 1881 shortly after the wave of interest in the bicycle reached Canada. The club was comprised primarily of young men who were members of the merchant, manufacturing, and professional class. The club, formed in response to public concerns over cyclists' conflict with pedestrians, sought to legitimize the activity as a sport and recreation in London. The organizers of this club were able to assume the leadership of the sport in the city and, for a time, limit access to and regulate participation in organized cycling events held on both public roads and private and public athletic grounds. Yet, with bicycles becoming a more democratic vehicle for both recreation and transportation, the hold of private clubs over the activity was short lived.

The London Bowling Club was formed in 1892 as part of the London Rowing and Canoe Club. The club established its prominent role in the governance of the sport of lawn bowling in the city and southwestern Ontario. By 1903 the London club's membership exceeded 245 people after being joined by two new clubs – the Thistle and Asylum Lawn Bowling Club. These clubs' reliance on private property for facilities and club houses provided their elite membership with social exclusivity that had been lost in baseball and later cycling clubs. As with cycling during the 1880s

the cost involved and the elite nature of the club membership limited broader participation in the sport.

These three examples of sports and sport clubs in London provide insight into the process of the institutionalization of sport in a late nineteenth century urban setting. In particular, this examination provides a clear example of the resilience of elite sportsmen to perpetuate and if necessary reconstruct socially exclusive organizations within the domain of sport and recreation.
