

## **Sport and Society: Towards a Synthetic History?**

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Barbara Wilson, *The Half Million: The Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946* (Toronto, University of Toronto, 1988), seems pitched more at the popular market than at serious scholars. The academics prefer to make their cases in journal articles, the veterans and popular presses reminisce, the old military history of battles and campaigns soldiers on, and the new military history bides its time in the wings.

MARC MILNER

### Sport and Society: Towards a Synthetic History?

AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON, one that transcended class and gender boundaries, sport has been important to the Maritime consciousness since the mid-1850s. Any historian committed to comprehending and reconstructing the Maritime social milieu needs to understand how sport and leisure helped not merely to reflect but to define that society. This is hardly a new idea. In 1911, while debating the merits of baseball in the *Canadian Courier*, Ernest Paterson commented on the significance of the sport to Victorian society and pleaded for scholars of the future to include that dimension in any historical analysis of that era.

Any historian of this age and continent, failing to give due weight to professional baseball as a powerful influence in the life of the people, would be guilty of a serious omission. The game has, in truth, come to form a salient feature of the social conditions of our times..., no one taking note of these things could fail to perceive that baseball is playing a large part, a part of singular significance, in the life of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Few historians have heeded that call until recently. Analysis of cultural and leisure activities have rarely been considered as important as, for example, political events. Yet with the broadening interest in social history in recent years, the cultural significance of sports and athletics to society has become increasingly apparent. Academic historians, however, still tend to leave sport history to physical educationalists or to community historians who are often without any formal credentials. If their work does not meet the historian's expectations, they nonetheless are to be commended for taking steps, no matter how tentative

1 Ernest R. Patterson, "Two Views of Baseball: The Critic's View", *Canadian Courier*, 10, 17 (23 September 1911), pp. 6-7.

and awkward, towards a synthetic history that incorporates the heritage of sporting culture into the history of society.

Foremost among Canadian sport historians is Alan Metcalfe, whose monograph, *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1987), reflects a serious attempt to produce a definitive history of organized Canadian sport. While earlier works on Canada's sporting heritage had remained wedded to a descriptive formula, Metcalfe has integrated ideas about class and urbanization to the development of sport in industrializing Canada. Prior to the mid-19th century, Metcalfe argues, sport in British North America reflected characteristics of the dominant culture, that established by the British military presence. From the 1850s onward, the industrialization and urbanization of the country permitted the growth of organized sport, controlled by and usually limited to the urban and Anglophone elite. This class was prominent in the social sporting clubs which catered to male participants in activities such as sleighing, hunting, and yachting.

Even more important than sporting clubs was the rapid emergence of organized team sports and, subsequently, the rise of individual and team competition. Working class participation in these areas, Metcalfe persuasively argues, was peripheral, at least until the development of professional sports in the early 20th century. Dominated by the middle-class, amateurism was established as a means to an end, the end being a healthy and wholesome body. This middle-class elite portrayed professional sport as a less savoury, less couth, and less acceptable activity. Documenting how the growth of commercialism and professionalism in sport was ironically needed to finance the facilities needed by gentlemen amateurs, Metcalfe uses the Montreal Shamrocks lacrosse team as a case study to demonstrate his thesis of both middle-class hegemony and urban domination over organized sport.

Since Metcalfe concentrates on urban sport, he minimalizes the impact of sporting activity on the Atlantic region. According to Metcalfe the Paris crew of oarsmen from St. John, New Brunswick and Nova Scotian rower George Brown were almost but not quite, national heroes. That is a distinction he more readily gives to Ontario's professional oarsman Ned Hanlon. Part of the blame for the neglect of Atlantic Canada can be attributed to Metcalfe's research technique of spot checking four Atlantic newspapers for four years, 1889, 1895, 1905, and 1915. In a book that purports to be both national in coverage, and to embrace an entire century of sport endeavours, this research technique hides or distorts the true dimensions of sporting culture in the region. Hence one of the enduring aspects of Atlantic Canada, the inter-regional rivalries, found in political, educational, religious, and recreational pursuits, has been lost. As a result mid-19th century Atlantic Canadian sport is portrayed as having been dominated by the British influence; and Metcalfe claims that in the later years the sporting culture was at once less evolved and less significant than that of Ontario and Quebec.

Though Metcalfe is quite correct to emphasize the elite control over some sports, he neglects the impact of both working class participation in or resistance to sporting activity. From cock-fighting, to pedestrian contests, to billiards, to hastily arranged games held during the Saturday half-holiday the working class contributed to the culture of Canadian sport in ways that were different from but no less significant than the activities of the middle class elite. The mutuality of class participation, the resistance to elite domination, the demonstration of both class cohesiveness and class consciousness, all of these should be vital points in a truly synthetic history.

If Metcalfe reduces the importance of the working class in the development of Canadian sport, he totally neglects Canadian women of all classes who were also 'learning to play'. True, women were often only spectators at many sporting events, but they also participated as individuals and as teams in a complex array of organized activities. Pedestrianism, tennis, bicycling, basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, swimming, skating; women athletes contributed to these sports and to many more. Helen Lenskyj's monograph *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport & Sexuality* (Toronto, The Women's Press, 1986), details the struggle that women have had in establishing not only control over their sporting activity but also their very right to participate in athletics. Lenskyj argues that patriarchal notions about women's sexuality, physiology, and femininity determined their sporting activity. Even today, she emphasizes, women's sporting heritage continues to be co-opted so that males can control female sexuality and reproduction. Lenskyj argues that by their patriarchal attitudes about the female body male doctors imposed limitations upon women's involvement in sports. The presumed home-loving qualities and maternal instincts of women suggested that physical fitness and sports were not only unimportant to the gender, but were also potentially dangerous to the delicate female reproductive tract. After the turn of the century when women had demonstrated that they could and would participate in various forms of athletics, medical opinion was revamped. Hereafter physicians and physical culture experts promoted physical exercise not to achieve pleasure or skill, but as a way to make these organs robust. Both doctors and a growing body of sport experts, claimed that truly feminine women were naturally uncompetitive. Appropriate physical exercise should improve women's suitability for their future maternal role; inappropriate, strenuous, competitive, or 'masculine' sports would degrade their femininity, ruin their appearance, and in short their chance at the ideal, marriage and motherhood.

Lenskyj argues that these patriarchal attitudes have molded women's sport up to the present day. As long as women athletes did not threaten male records or male sexuality they could pursue sporting achievements. One of the most significant results has been the sex differentiation between male and female sports. Since many people are socialized to perceive athletic ability as a masculine characteristic, women who did well in sports found that their

sexuality was in question. Concerns about homosexuality, excessive musculature, body shapes, anabolic steroids, appropriate femininity, and sexual identity have clouded women's sports in recent years. As Lenskyj maintains, attempts to define the physical, psychological, and sexual identity of sportswomen has only increased the stigmatization of the female athlete. Despite this, she concludes optimistically, suggesting that since the late 1970s feminist women have had the "last word" and have begun to transform sports away from the traditional patriarchal limitations (p. 139).

Lenskyj contends that *Out of Bounds* is a "history of women and sport during the past century". Not written in a strictly thematic or chronological order, the book lurches from decade to decade and back again. At times the interplay of eras emphasizes the residual and emergent tensions evident in reconstructing attitudes of the past and present. The discussion regarding the Victorian "mannish woman" and the present debate on muscular "freaks" is enhanced by this technique (pp. 57-64). At other times this lack of a coherent time frame confuses the reader and allows Lenskyj to contradict herself. In 1892, for example, Senda Berensom modified basketball rules specifically to suit perceived notions of female physiology, femininity, and physical ability; Lenskyj makes this point in chapter one (p. 28). But in chapter five, after noting that a 1979 Tennessee ruling suggested that split-court rules limited a girl's chance at athletic scholarship, Lenskyj notes that girl's rules basketball had a "tradition and ritual dating back to the 1920's" (p. 101).

Along with the vagueness of the time frame, Lenskyj fails to identify the region that her research covers. While one sometimes gains the impression that she is referring to all of Canada, most of the book refers to the Toronto area, with at best, a mention of Montreal, a photograph referring to Manitoba, and much dependence on American experts. Women of all regions have endured patriarchal attitudes, however, although they sometimes confronted them on their own terms. By never defining her region Lenskyj ignores the possibility of differences in women's athletic participation in the Atlantic area or elsewhere, and fails to confirm or deny any regional responses or applications of patriarchy.

It is this concept of patriarchy, around which the monograph centres, that raises the most significant, albeit unanswered issue of the book. If women's sporting activities have been limited and defined solely by patriarchal attitudes, what was the role of women in accepting, rejecting, or resisting these views? The relevance of this question emerges from the fact that while Lenskyj condemns attitudes of male physicians or male experts, many of her examples are attributable to women who controlled and limited the boundaries of their own gender's physical activity. Were women so passive that they blindly accepted male authority as a guide to women's athletic ability? I think not. Given that women had their own agency why did Dr. Arabella Kenealy argue that women who participated in sports neglected their maternal and domestic duties? Why did Ethel Cartwright advocate only light exercises during menstruation? Why

did Senda Berenson modify basketball rules to enhance femininity and reduce 'masculine' competitiveness and violence? Why did Agnes Waymen state that girls were non-competitive? Why did Mary Decker refuse to refer to women athletes from Eastern bloc nations as "she"? Why did Patsy Neal suggest that coaches quell any masculine mannerisms that girls exhibited? This is not to deny patriarchal control; certainly women's athletics have been downgraded by male attitudes and authority. Patriarchal biases certainly arise when women's breast development is a topic of Olympic coverage (1976); or more recently when a Maritime university athletic team disbands amid allegations of lesbianism. But patriarchal attitudes appear to be only one reason for the degradation of women's athletic skills and the prominent role given to their sexuality and reproductive abilities. In her doctoral thesis Cindy Himes has argued that American women played a powerful role in guiding women's sports into a maternalistic mode. For Himes, both class and gender have been determinates in defining women's sport.<sup>2</sup> The experts and physicians on which Lenskyj relies, whether they are male or female, certainly seem to exhibit attitudes representative of the professional middle class. Ideally a synthetic history of sport would incorporate both an analysis of class and gender conflict within the sporting world and thus begin to address the issues which Lenskyj's book raises.

If there are limits to the analysis in Metcalfe's and Lenskyj's monographs, they have at least moved beyond the usual mode of sport historiography. Other monographs like William Humber's *Cheering For The Home Team: The Story of Baseball in Canada* (Erin, Ontario, Boston Mills Press, 1983), or his *Freewheeling: The Story of Bicycling in Canada* (Erin, Ontario, Boston Mills Press, 1986), adhere to a coffee-table genre at the expense of what could potentially be a scintillating analysis. Both of Humber's books are commendable for their photographs and illustrations. In both there are stories and facts that arguably could fit into a synthetic history. Instead significant researched material is scattered among empty white spaces, illustrations, short paragraphs, and awkward sentences. In *Cheering For the Home Team*, Humber uses a nationalist stance to argue that baseball is just as much a Canadian sport as an American one and hence deserves its professional clubs. This nationalism even extends to the claim that Canadians are morally superior. Bud Fowler of Hudson, New York, was the first black professional player. Signed as pitcher to the Guelph Maple Leafs, Fowler found that his presence disturbed many of the American players on the team. Because of this animosity, Fowler was released to another team. Humber maintains that "a lot of this can be put down to obstreperous Americans plying their nasty racism on Canadian fields". In the next paragraph, however, Humber notes his shock in finding that Tip O'Neill of Woodstock, Ontario, "was equally ill-disposed to black players" (p. 106). What

2 Cindy L. Himes, "The Female Athlete in American Society: 1860-1940", Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1986.

merely disconcerts Humber could provide fodder for an historian interested in the tensions of racial conflict in the athletic context.

In attempting to relate the story of baseball in Canada Humber has devoted a chapter to "The Maritime Baseball Spirit". Most players Humber argues were quick to leave the Maritimes (and Newfoundland) for the United States, since there was little chance of a successful career in baseball at home. Ironically American players were often subsidized on Maritime teams as they waited their chance to play in the major leagues. While Humber mentions the tensions between the professional and amateur teams, he fails to give the matter the attention it deserves. Similarly he refrains from discussing the issues of team rivalry and imported players, and with the exception of some collier teams, he neglects working class teams. Along with a lack of analysis and a poor writing style Humber fails to give sources for his information with the exception of casual references to interviews. What he does demonstrate is that there is a wealth of untapped sources available for the historian interested in creating a multi-faceted history of society.

Humber's book, *Freewheeling* follows the same pattern as his earlier book: short paragraphs, impressive illustrations, and once again, undocumented facts. This book is also riddled with inaccurate, distorted, and unclear phraseology such as the one sentence paragraph: "Bicycling, untrue to its later proletarian image, was truly plebian in character — right down to the nifty dark-blue patrol jackets and grey helmets worn by the 20 Ottawa [Bicycle Club] members in 1883" (p. 35). While Humber's *Cheering For The Home Team* locates Newfoundland as one of the Maritime provinces (pp. 87-8), late 19th century Newfoundland is placed in the Dominion of Canada in the *Freewheeling* chapter "From Heart's Content to Dawson: Bicycle Fever Spreads Throughout the Dominion" (p. 37). Chapters detail the Victorian passion for cycling, the bicycle tour craze, the development of the cycle industry, stories of early bicycle races, the arduous six-day competitions, and the modern bicycle racer as epitomized by Steve Bauer. One chapter interesting in its content, though of course not documented, deals with the formation of the Canadian Corps Cyclists' Battalion and the role of the bicycle in wartime. While there is no chapter devoted strictly to the Atlantic region, snippets of information about cycling in this region are scattered throughout the book.

While the books discussed so far have either ignored the Atlantic region or reduced its significance to mere descriptions of events and participants, there are a few books and booklets which deal specifically with the area. Like the national histories they demonstrate both the potential of sport history and its neglect. Claude Darrach's *Race to Fame: The Inside Story of the Bluenose* (Windsor, N.S., Lancelot, 1985), is a case in point. Based on crew member Darrach's diary compiled during 1920-1938, this brief book is a tribute to the racing schooner's lasting fame. What is striking is the waste of potential material for an interested and imaginative historian. Darrach has played a role not only as a participant in

the region's history, but in developing the mythologies that go hand in hand with that history. Tied to a belief in the region's "Golden Age", indeed perhaps representing a culmination of the era, the 'making of the tradition' of Bluenose fact and fiction deserves attention by historians.

Another regional sport history is H. Charles Ballem's revision of his Dalhousie physical education thesis, *Abegweit Dynasty, 1899-1954: The Story of the Abegweit Amateur Athletic Association* (Charlottetown, The Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1986), a chronological history of past glories. This multi-sport organization, which dominated Eastern Canadian sport for three decades, emerged partly out of the late 19th century increase in leisure time and partly in response to concerns about a decline in physical and mental health. Slower to evolve than comparable clubs in Montreal and Halifax, Ballem credits both the establishment of an athletic ground and the leadership of elite members of the community for its early success. The roots of this sporting tradition date back to 1884 and the formation of the Abegweit Rugby Association. Ballem suggests that unlike the Halifax Wanderers Club, the Abegweits were identified with the working class. This is debatable. Ballem gives no proof and in fact notes that six of the original members had rugby experience at university, suggesting a less than working-class background. Given the social activities, time commitments, and travel expenses connected with the teams, as well as the favourable support of prominent community members, it would seem, as Metcalfe has suggested, that the elite did control organized sport of this caliber. It is harder to document the class background of spectators. No doubt this aspect of sport was more democratic given the large size of audiences for sporting events.

By the turn-of-the-century the Abbies had branched into hockey, track and field, baseball, and basketball. With the success of organized hockey in the region the problem of professionalism emerged. Yet Ballem neither discusses this issue nor does he examine the problems of class divisions in sport and the outmigration of athletes. The role of women athletes in the Abegweit organization was minimal save for a brief flurry of hockey activity in the 1920s. Ballem shows the lack of importance of sportswomen when he notes that several members of the 1926 women's team, the Island champions, would play significant roles in fund raising and membership drives. A combination of management troubles, internal rivalries, high transportation costs, and defeats by mainland teams signalled the beginning of the decline for the Island club in the inter-war period. Specialization at the administrative level brought further frustration as individual sports tried to survive the threat posed by professional teams and the impact of non-Islander hockey players. By World War Two the Abegweit club was in decline, and by 1954 it had disbanded as a multi-club organization.

A.J. (Sandy) Young's two volume *Beyond Heroes: A Sport History of Nova Scotia* (Windsor, N.S., Lancelot Press, 1988) also deals with sport on a provincial level. Young attempts to demonstrate that there are worthy regional



athletes beyond those seen on television. He does achieve his objective. Young has compiled a vast collection of Nova Scotian sportsmen and sportswomen who competed in an even more impressive variety of athletic endeavors. This series of vignettes and photographs admittedly makes better reading than a mere listing of names, dates, and scores; it is unfortunate that Young fails to take the book "beyond heroes" and into historical analysis.

While both Ballem and Young deal with a range of athletic activities in the Atlantic region, Heather Watts' *Silent Steeds: Cycling in Nova Scotia to 1900* (Halifax, Nova Scotia Museum, 1985) demonstrates the impact of only one sporting activity on an area. Written to complement a Nova Scotia Museum exhibit on the history of bicycling, this brief book is at least a start in the direction of a synthetic history. While Watts does not locate the sport in its broader social context, the booklet is well-researched and complete with both notes and sources. Watts gives a short history of the forerunners of the bicycle from the adult hobby horse to the velocipede craze in the mid 1860s, to the high wheels of the 1880s, to the development of the safety bicycle. Watt is not content merely to celebrate the popularity of the bicycle. She discusses the influence of the machine in challenging the notion of 'women's proper sphere' and its contribution towards the dress reform movement. She examines individual riders like Karl Creelman, the "Truro Globetrotter", as well as touring clubs like the Halifax Ramblers. Watts demonstrates the popularity of the sport when she relates that the Ramblers sponsored an 1897 cycle exhibition so grand that special excursion tickets were arranged to bring people to the city. In addition the 19th century bicycle boom influenced new systems of credit, modern forms of advertising, and the modern consumerist society. Bicycle touring also brought attention to the need for improvements in road systems, as well as sponsoring an increase in provincial tourism. In this brief book Watts shows a glimmer of the possibilities of how the history of sport fits into a comprehensive history of society.

Whereas *Silent Steeds* shows the impact of a specific sport on a region and its potential contribution to social history, Brian Flood's *Saint John: A Sporting Tradition, 1785-1985* (Saint John, N.B., Neptune Publishing, 1985) examines the athletic heritage of one city. A descriptive history, written by a sporting enthusiast rather than a historian, this well illustrated book nonetheless demonstrates competent research. While Flood has concentrated mainly on successful individuals and teams, he proves that in Saint John alone there is enough of a sporting heritage to warrant an extensive treatment. Where Alan Metcalfe gives only brief attention to the Paris crew, Flood relates with admirable enthusiasm the story of their dramatic success and the widespread support for the team. Flood also details the sporting achievements of Saint John athletes like 1881 World Skulling Champion, Wallace Ross, 1890 World Professional Speed Skating Champion, Hugh McCormick, 1892 North American Speed Skating champion, Fred Breen, 1892-94 and 1897-1900 World Welter

Weight Champion, Mysterious Billy Smith, 1900 World Welter Weight Champion, Eddie Connolly, and four time winner of the Canadian Ladies Golf title, Mabel Thomson. In addition Flood details the history of a variety of sports teams from baseball to basketball to bowling. Like so many other sport historians Flood is most concerned with specific details and (male) achievements rather than with historical analysis. What makes his book more successful than most is not the penetrating insights, but the thorough research on a broad topic. While class-based sports, interprovincial rivalry, professionalism, and issues from out-migration to transportation are often peripheral to the main story, Flood has at least given a hint of both the rich sporting heritage of the area and the potential of Atlantic Canadian sport historiography.

The first step in beginning to examine the cultural and sporting traditions of the region is to admit that they exist. Most of these books fail in historical analysis, but sadly enough they still represent a step forward in learning about the Atlantic region's sporting heritage. If the work fails to qualify as viable history that is only because historians have been neglectful. At the very least, these books of popular history rather than academic history have exploded one myth about the Atlantic region. In 1970, Kevin Jones argued at the First Canadian Symposium on the History of Sport and Physical Education that there was little to say about Eastern Canadian athletes:

The Maritimes, unlike the Prairies, Ontario and Quebec were economically depressed and sport was never encouraged to the extent that it was in other parts of Canada. In comparison with Ontario, Quebec and the Prairies, the Maritimes produced comparatively few champion sportsmen or national teams.<sup>3</sup>

Through the work of non-academic historians that has been refuted. A truly synthetic history, however, is still to be written.

MICHAEL SMITH

3 Kevin Jones, "Sport in Canada, 1900-1920", *Proceedings of the First Canadian Symposium on the History of Sport and Physical Education* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 45.

## What Happened to Canadian Intellectual History?

DURING THE PAST TWO DECADES CANADIAN historical writing has enjoyed its