

Canadian Sport History

Nancy B. Bouchier

Volume 28, numéro 1, autumn 1998

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad28_1re02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Bouchier, N. B. (1998). Canadian Sport History. *Acadiensis*, 28(1), 98–102.

Canadian Sport History

WHEN ALAN METCALFE PUBLISHED his important monograph *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914* slightly more than a decade ago, he lamented the tendency of Canadian sport historians to treat sport “as ancillary to more ‘important’ themes in social history”. At the time practically no scholarly monographs dealt with Canada’s sporting past. Metcalfe’s book explored the dramatic changes experienced in Canadian recreation before the First World War, as new forms of sport emerged and as middle-class, urban, Anglophone males developed an ethic of amateurism. As well, Metcalfe examined the rise of commercialism and the emergent conflict between proponents of competing models of sport. Metcalfe situated these changes in the context of Canada’s urban and industrial growth. His book broke new ground with its critical analysis of sport history and its assertion that knowing this history was central to understanding Canadian culture. Metcalfe modestly labeled his effort “a first exploratory step”, because, he argued, “at the moment the gap between what research exists and what should exist is so great”.¹

Change has been slow, but this gap has begun to close. Excellent monographs on sport history have emerged in the last few years, chiefly from the University of Toronto Press. They indicate that historians and others are beginning to take sport seriously. Two of these books have won honourable mentions for the Canadian Historical Association’s Sir John A. Macdonald Prize. Delightfully, some of these new books have captured the eloquence, grace and subtle humour that Morris Mott once claimed was so essential to the writing of good history, but so noticeably lacking in the historiography of Canadian sport.²

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the themes identified in Metcalfe’s book are central to this new work. They include: the immense popularity of baseball in Canada; the hegemonic force of amateur ideology and the corporate-capitalist professional model of sport; sport’s rootedness in 19th-century “respectable” Protestant culture; and the relationship between sport and identity. Although Metcalfe’s book was admittedly limited in its scope, largely excluding women, native peoples, workers and others from its analysis, newer works have included these important groups. In doing so they have uncovered multiple meanings in the shaping of leisure and have pointed to recreation’s incredible complexity. Together, the most recent works suggest that there were many types of contests taking place on the cultural terrain of sport.

The promise of sport history for the writing of good Canadian social history is readily apparent in Colin Howell’s *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime*

1 Alan Metcalfe, *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 9, 14.

2 Morris Mott, “Academic and Popular Sports History”, in K. B. Wamsley, ed., *Method and Methodology in Sport and Cultural History* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1995), pp. 162-71.

Baseball (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995). This book is engaging, well-written, well-researched and thought-provoking. Howell knows baseball well, writing in his preface that his fascination for the sport began in his youth in the Annapolis Valley. Yet his sympathies for the game, evident in the slight touches of nostalgia in the book, do not inhibit the well-honed and insightful critical analysis. Howell's book is important for understanding Canadian popular discourses about the social purposes of leisure and the layers of meaning involved in the creation and experience of popular culture.

Howell uses baseball to show how these discourses were constructed in a "contested social landscape" rife with rivalries based upon ethnicity, gender, race, social class and community identity. He does this with a keen sense of Maritime history and a solid understanding of changes in the way baseball was played. American mythology aside, he argues convincingly that this sport was the most Canadian of games and offers ample evidence from newspapers, archival sources and interviews to support his case. His work draws on primary sources and a vast secondary literature concerning sport and popular culture. The breadth of his research is impressive and provides many leads for other scholars interested in the area.

Howell's book begins with a chapter "laying out the field" of theoretical approaches used by sport scholars and ends with a thoughtful "post-game reflection" which argues that baseball no longer has the same connection to Maritime cultural life and community-based identity it once had. Howell arranges his chapters in a chronological and thematic fashion. Readers are led from an accounting of baseball's earliest roots as a popular communal game to its emergence as a commodity in a modern consumer society. His chapters "Gendered Baselines: The Tour of the Chicago Blackstockings" and "'Others': Race, Ethnicity and Community Baseball" are particularly good for they provide glimpses into the strategies adopted by people who played ball (often on segregated teams) in the face of discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity. In "Baseball and Civic Accomplishment", Howell establishes the connection between the progressive reform impulse, community identity and baseball. This sets up his major argument concerning the collapse of the community-based baseball tradition in the years after the Second World War and the rise of a continentally-marketed commercial game played by men "imported" from places outside the Maritime region. Professional baseball is the baseline for this aspect of Howell's analysis. His focus on the dominant model of the sport leaves the role of its popular "other" version — softball — in limbo. One wonders how his conclusions would differ if he had included softball in his analysis of sport and cultural identity. Howell's choice raises a central issue in the historiography of Canadian sport: What is to be made of non-dominant models of sport? What do they tell us about Canadian culture?

Bruce Kidd ventures into this territory with *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996). Winner of the North American Society for Sport History book prize, this well-written, carefully-researched book provides a compelling analysis of several alternative models of sport. Like Howell, Kidd views sport as a contested terrain. Kidd, a former international runner and well-known political activist in Canadian sporting circles, writes passionately about his subject and conveys a strong social message about contemporary sport. His basic argument is direct and simple: the corporate-capitalist sport model, epitomized by the National

Hockey League with its historical linkage to the state-run CBC, emerged as a hegemonic model of sport in 20th-century Canada in the face of competing models of sport. These alternative models were promoted at a national level by amateur sport enthusiasts, feminists and revolutionary workers. Kidd's analysis of competing models of sport provided by the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation and the Workers' Sport Association highlights their stark contrast with the well-publicized, commercial, continental and exclusively male model that we all know so well today. Kidd's analysis, however, is more than an academic exercise. It makes an important point concerning contemporary sport: the struggle for sport "ain't over 'til it's over". Hegemony, by its nature, is never complete. We need only turn to the sports page to realize that *the* way of playing sport is always subject to challenge and resistance. By showing rich, long and proud histories of alternate forms of sport, Kidd hopes to demonstrate the tremendous potential these forms hold for future development of sport in Canada.

According to Kidd, the Workers' Sports Association (WSA), which was rooted in a European, class-conscious workers' culture and associated with the communist press, provided "the first systematic critique of capitalist sports to be heard in Canada" (p. 183). Kidd finds echoes of this critique in the writings of contemporary Canadian Sport sociologists. Women also played an important role in challenging the male, corporate-capitalist model of sport. In "Girls' Sport Run by Girls", Kidd shows how the Women's Amateur Athletic Federation created a "not-for-profit" female alternative sport model, despite dominant notions of femininity and the medical profession's ideas concerning the limitations of female physiology. As with his analysis of the WSA, Kidd presents the voices of those who struggled for alternatives — in this case female voices drawn from many interviews. He provides a compelling account of the social and political interactions of female sport organizers. Kidd maintains that deep-rooted cultural discourses of masculinity persist as a chief obstacle in women's struggles in sport today: "There is little to challenge the naturalization of the male model" (p. 144). He also notes: "that so many women succeed does not discount the enormous contradictions they experience" (p. 144). This is so true.

Kidd's study provides a well-integrated analysis of some of the struggles in the contested terrain of Canadian sport. Although, according to Kidd, only one group had a significant voice in the post-war era, he is careful not to let the "losers" in the struggle disappear from the historical record. Kidd wisely chose to focus on organized groups which left paper trails or had key figures still alive to tell their stories. These groups provided clues to other voices of dissent which have been suppressed, muted or silenced. While the history of these groups certainly is not the whole story, it is a very good start.

Lynne Marks' *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996) explores another promising avenue for sport history. Marks analyzes the relationship between sport and the construction of masculinity in the context of Protestant concern for "respectability" in the late 19th century. Using case studies drawn from three Ontario towns — Ingersoll, Thorold and Campellford — Marks examines the hegemonic force of late 19th century evangelical Protestantism. Her analysis of the subtle influence gender, class, age and family status have on individual

and group identity is perceptive, as is her consideration of the tensions between ideology and social behaviour.

Marks' research is meticulous. She effectively uses local-level church records, newspapers, municipal records, city directories, assessment rolls and manuscript censuses to sustain her arguments. Much of the data that support her analysis are provided in appendix tables which help the reader discern the demographic backgrounds of the members of local churches and fraternal and voluntary organizations. Her sources do not make it easy to capture the voices of those who did not share a concern for Protestant "respectability", yet she pieces together their story admirably, while also conveying the earnestness of those who did.

Marks' chapters "Rough and Respectable" and "Mostly Male Worlds: Leisure and Associational Life" are of particular interest to sport historians because of their broad consideration of community-level leisure activities. They probe the male world of voluntary associations, examining sports teams as well as fire departments, fraternal orders and bands. Marks sees these as chief sites for shaping and expressing male cultural identities. Marks situates the "muscular Christian" ethos — a common theme in sport history, evident in the works of Howell and Kidd — in the broader context of mainstream Protestant culture. She notes that civic holidays provided an opportunity for community boosters to promote morality and respectability, but as well provided the occasion for a wide variety of "rowdy" entertainment. On these days, some townspeople chose to listen to famous preachers, but many more turned to other, rougher diversions — watching a firemen's exhibition, drinking, fighting or chasing a greased pig. Marks shows that even among those who were at the centre of Protestant hegemonic culture, consensus was elusive.

Yet, as William Humber and John St. James demonstrate in their *All I Thought of Was Baseball: Writings on a Canadian Pastime* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996), consensus in sport is possible in people's love of the game. This edited collection does not claim to be sport history, but it is all about sport and history. It resonates with the passions aroused in Canadians by baseball. While this volume will certainly appeal to baseball aficionados, it will also be attractive to anyone interested more generally in Canadian sport. It contains more than 50 stories drawn from the work of fiction writers, amateur historians, journalists and others. Some of the pieces are new, some old, some compelling, some deeply insightful and some simply descriptive. All concern memories of baseball. While uneven in literary quality, they provide insights into the game and the authors' experiences of it as social observers, players, fans and coaches. In the editors' words, "the writings in this book are about a magical place" (p. xiv). Many of the stories evoke this magic wonderfully.

The titles suggest the scope of the book and some of the passions and quirkiness associated with the game: "They Hoydens Meet Helena Rubenstein", "All We Really Wanted Was a Ballpark", "All I Thought About Was Baseball", "Canada from Eh to Zed", "The Magick of the Druids", "Notes for a Baseball Opera", "Babe Ruth Comes to Pickle River" and "The Smilin' Rattler". The writings include works by some of Canada's best authors, such as Morley Callaghan, Mordecai Richler and W. P. Kinsella. Important historical documents are included as well, such as excerpts from Bryce's 1876 *Canadian Baseball Guide* and Adam Ford's 1886 description of "A Game Long-ago Which Closely Resembled our Present National Game". The contents are neatly balanced to provide a useful consideration of the sport. Marshall

McLuhan's "Baseball is Culture" is perhaps my favourite piece in this collection, for his was an early authoritative voice for the importance of sport in Canadian culture. McLuhan wrote: "Sports lovers as a group would not thank anybody who told them that their eager spin through the daily sports page was a cultural activity of great value and significance to society" (p. 211). Thankfully, historians are now beginning to get his point: by studying sport we develop a broader, richer understanding of ourselves and Canada's cultural past.

The last few years have been good times for the historiography of Canadian sport. Many of the gaps in the literature noted by Metcalfe are being addressed by fresh monographs and articles published in new journals such as the *Sport History Review*. (This was previously Metcalfe's own journal, the *Canadian Journal of the History of Sport*.) The May 1998 festschrift issue of the *Review* honours Metcalfe's retirement from the University of Windsor and includes five articles on Canadian sport. Their titles reflect the variety of interests emerging in Canadian sport history: "Environment, the State, and Recreational Swimming in Hamilton Harbour", "State Formation and Institutionalized Racism", "A Nova Scotian Perspective on Canadian Sport History", "Reflections on the Writing of Sport History in the Postmodern Age" and "Connecting the Strands of Physical Culture in Native Lives". These works and others are mapping out new territories for the understanding of sport. Canadian historians are beginning to tell a more nuanced story of our sporting past and they are doing so in ways that enrich Canadian social history.

NANCY B. BOUCHIER