**INTRODUCTION**

Cynthia Comacchio

Sport is about much more than simply the games and physical activities that people engage in for recreation and health. The history of sport reveals much about identity—individual, group, and national. We see how concepts of power and status are literally “played” in rules and regulations reflecting and promoting class, regional, and national objectives; in determining which activities and which players are featured; in identifying who is encouraged or even permitted to play and who constitutes the audience; in shaping relations between players and team owners, players and fans, teams and communities, and professionals and amateurs; in setting out certain constructions of “race,” gender, and nation. By focusing on individual or team ability, sport can make such social distinctions as class and “race” appear less relevant, while also reinforcing the *status quo* and the values that sustain it. Moreover, certain visions of community, nationhood, and international standing are imprinted in “the national sport” and “the national team.” Arguably, this has been particularly vital to Canadian national identity, given the problematic nature of that identity in view of American influences in commercialization, mass media, popular culture and the blurring of national sporting boundaries. The latter is most evident in the evolution of “Canada’s game” through the so-called National Hockey League, already half-American by the 1920s.

Also significant is the evolving relationship between sport and the state. Since the late-nineteenth century, governments at all levels have increasingly invested in the bodily and mental health of Canadians. Whether to ensure industrial productivity, protect the urban masses from spreading disease, reduce infant mortality and improve child health, or produce fit and disciplined men for military purposes, the physical training and wider health benefits of sport made it important to state objectives for public welfare. Sport and its related concerns became “national” concerns. The early voluntary, amateur, noncommercial sporting associations modernized as the nation did, becoming organized, structured, and institutionalized, often through state investment.

The early post-Confederation years witnessed a number of changes taking place in sport as it gradually took on its modern form. The cricket, golf, rowing, and rugby transplanted from Great Britain remained popular, but newer “home-grown” activities, such as lacrosse and hockey also became popular, at least among men, while the “bicycle craze” of the 1890s drew young women into public participation as never before. Derived from the Aboriginal field game of baggataway, lacrosse is one of the oldest organized sports in North America. In 1860, a Montreal dentist, William George Beers, set down regulations for the game; the National Lacrosse Association of Canada was formed in 1867, becoming the new Dominion’s first sport organization. Lacrosse also became a white man’s game, leaving its original inventors to play in their own leagues and matches. Despite its historic national significance, lacrosse officially became the Canadian summer sport only in 1994. Long characterized as “Canada’s game,” hockey, the official national winter sport, probably also originated by a cultural blend of First Nations field games and the British stick-and-ball games brought to the colonies by the military in the early nineteenth century. The first organized game, featuring the innovation of the flat wooden puck instead of a ball, took place in Montreal in 1875. By 1879, the McGill University Hockey Club had been established. The Amateur Hockey Association of Canada was formed in 1886. Avid hockey fan Governor-General Lord Stanley donated a trophy in 1893 for the national championship, and the first Stanley Cup game, won by the Montreal AAA, was played in March 1893. The
first international world championship, held at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, was taken by the Winnipeg Falcons.

Advances in transportation and communications affected participation in sport, as popular culture expanded beyond local geographic limits. More nonplayers of all descriptions could now take some part in sporting activities, whether as spectators in the stands of an out-of-town match, or by reading the latest team news in dedicated “sport pages” of the newspapers, the feature articles in a growing number of mass circulation magazines, or the new sport magazines aimed at a male readership. After the Great War, radio brought games even more directly into many Canadian homes. Legendary “play-by-play” announcer Foster Hewitt made the first hockey broadcast from a telephone in 1923; he also called the first game played at Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens when it opened in 1931, and hosted CBC Television’s “Hockey Night in Canada” soon after the national broadcaster went on the air in September 1952. Listening to or watching hockey broadcasts became a weekly family ritual across the nation, especially during the culminating events of the Stanley Cup playoffs.

Industrialization and urbanization gave new meaning to the social value of sport and recreation in the interests of public health and civic order. Rapid, unplanned urbanization, with its resultant overcrowded housing and dirty streets, and its diverse “social evils” (real and imagined), also spurred public interest in the health, citizenship training, and overall fitness benefits of organized sport and recreation. Social reformers, among them medical professionals, city planners, and other civic leaders, rallied enthusiastically behind the cause. It was hoped that, in the hands of trained personnel, a worthy source of diversion would lure Canadians of all ages away from the less-worthy new commercial entertainments, while also mitigating class hostility and promoting a common Canadian identity among the native-born and newly arrived alike. Paradoxically, the “Anglo-conformity” at the basis of early-twentieth-century national identity meant that such racialized views of Aboriginals, African-Canadians, and many newcomers, especially the so-called “undesirables” from Asia and nonwhite nations, were subjected to discrimination and segregation. Many such groups formed their own segregated teams: in 1900, African Nova Scotians established “The Colored Hockey League of the Maritimes,” while, on the other coast, Japanese-Canadian athletes founded the renowned Asahi Athletic Club Ice Hockey team in the Great War’s aftermath.

Gender constructions also shaped the type, nature, and extent of participation. A carefully defined ideal of manliness was part of the package delivered through such physically demanding and aggressive activities as lacrosse, hockey, and football. While modern young women were encouraged to be physically active for health reasons, public discourses about their involvement were often thick with caution about threats to their more delicate constitutions, hence their femininity, and, most important, to their presumed maternity. Invented by Ontario-born and McGill-educated Dr. James Naismith in Massachusetts in 1891, basketball became a particularly popular sport for girls and women. Reigning champions between 1915 and 1940, when they played their last game, were the Edmonton Commercial Graduates, known as the Edmonton Grads, who won 502 of their 522 official games. Led by a male coach, they played across North America and Europe during the interwar years, blazing the way for women athletes. Regardless of their skill, the media emphasized their respectable “feminine” behaviour on and off the court. Such notions of femininity also shaped media representation of the “Matchless Six,” the Canadian women’s track team that achieved a roster of medals at the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. Its star runner, Fanny “Bobbie” (sometimes “Bobby”) Rosenfeld, was as famous for the fashionable “bobbed” hair that gave her the nickname as for her considerable athletic prowess.
Organization, rationalization, standardization of regulations, and increasing professionalization among athletes and trainers intensified during these transitional years. Established in 1881, the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association was the first umbrella group to bring together the city’s many sport clubs, and formed the basis for the Amateur Athletic Association of Canada, the first such national organization. In 1909, the new Amateur Athletic Union of Canada absorbed the earlier associations. It was not until 1925, however, that the AAUC approved the formal establishment of the Women’s Amateur Athletic Union, despite the avid participation and award-winning prowess of many Canadian female athletes of the day.

With increasing intensity during the twentieth century, as the question of our cultural assimilation by the United States has also intensified, sport has been integral to the dilemma that is our “national identity.” Without a substantial roster of national symbols, myths, and heroes to solidify our feelings of distinctive “Canadianness,” it matters to many that hockey is “our” game, or that we can boast “stars” in lacrosse and in winter sports such as curling, skating, skiing, and snowboarding. Early Canadian sport celebrities, like Neil Hanlan of rowing fame or Onondaga long-distance runner Tom Longboat were recognized for their individual talents but also made to represent the best of “Canadian” qualities, and more specifically, of Canadian men, just as the Edmonton Grads and Olympic track stars such as Bobbie Rosenfeld stood for exemplary Canadian womanhood. As such, they reflected a “winning” national identity back to Canadians of their time and tell us much about what that identity meant to them.

QUESTIONS

1. Sporting activities and organizations are very much shaped by, and also reinforce, understandings of class, gender, “race,” and nation that prevail at any given moment in history. How do the historians in this section discuss these three categories?

2. How does the language used in Farrell’s hockey handbook demonstrate both the manliness of the game and the patriotism that it is supposed to elicit as the national game?

3. Racism was the reason for the Asahi Athletic Club’s founding. Its most popular teams, however, played hockey and baseball. What does this suggest about Japanese immigrants and their Canadian-born children, or perhaps about the immigrant experience in Canadian sport in general?

4. What is the “tone” of Alexandrine Gibb’s column about Toronto’s official victory parade for its “Matchless Six” female Olympic track team in 1928? Is it a gendered perspective?

5. What does the formal “victory” portrait of Olympic running champion Fanny “Bobbie” Rosenfeld with her trophies suggest about public expectations of women athletes in the 1920s?

WORKS CITED/FURTHER READING

