

Chapter 4

The Transition of Canadian Lacrosse From Field to Box in 1931

Until 1931, the sport of lacrosse looked the same in every country where it was played. From its beginnings as an organized sport in the mid-19th century in Canada, the game was played on a field by twelve-man teams. From Canada, lacrosse was exported to the United States and England in the 1870s. From England, it was exported to Australia and New Zealand. Lacrosse was well-received everywhere it was exported and was thriving in those places in the first few decades of the 20th century. In 1931, however, the country that gave birth to lacrosse adopted a substantially different form of the game than the one it exported to the U.S., U.K., and Australia.

The distinctly Canadian version adopted in 1931 is played by six-man squads on iceless hockey surfaces. The Canadian Lacrosse Association (C.L.A.) describes their version as the marriage of “the two most popular games, lacrosse and hockey,” creating what is called box lacrosse. The transition of the sport from a field game to an indoor one is notable in itself. What is perhaps more noteworthy is the speed at which the shift took place. The spring of 1931 saw the lacrosse season gear up much like it always had in Canada. Shortly into the 1931 season, though, this new form of the game appeared on the scene virtually out of nowhere, capturing the imagination of players and spectators alike. In September 1931, the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association (C.A.L.A.) adopted box lacrosse as the official version of the sport, turning its back on the field game played everywhere else in the lacrosse world.

Historians have long speculated on the origins of box lacrosse. People in 1931 were no less inquisitive, and they were offered what seemed like a plausible answer - that box lacrosse was developed in Australia by North American lacrosse players. Lacking enough players to field two teams, this group enclosed the playing area and reduced the number of players per side. This abbreviated version of the sport was reported to have taken off with the Australian sports fan, attracting up to 10 000 spectators. Later, lacrosse historians Weyland and Roberts dismissed this theory as merely an attempt on the part of North American entrepreneurs to publicize an upcoming box lacrosse venture. Others have thought that the origins were more indigenous. British Columbian sportswriter and historian Cleeve

Dheenshaw, with perhaps a hint of west coast chauvinism, attributed the invention to Jim McConaghy of Vancouver. This, however, is doubtful. Box lacrosse was well under way in Quebec and Ontario before the sport was taken up on the west coast. And, if McConaghy was the inventor, he was not quick to take credit for it. A more plausible explanation gives the credit to Montreal lacrosse enthusiast P.J. (Paddy) Brennan. Brennan was apparently frustrated by the frequent stoppages in play in the field version. In an effort to come up with a more palatable form of the game for the paying public, he experimented with an indoor version of the sport in the early 1920s. Brennan conducted this experiment at the Mount Royal Arena only to give up and continue playing lacrosse outdoors. A similar experiment was conducted in Toronto in May 1922, when two Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association (O.A.L.A.) teams played eight-men aside in the Mutual Street Arena. Although deemed a success at the time, it would be nine years before indoor lacrosse was played again.

If the exact origins of box lacrosse are a little hard to nail down, the driving force behind the transition in 1931 is obvious — the International Professional Lacrosse League (I.P.L.L.). The I.P.L.L. not only offered a brand-new product to a sports-hungry Canadian public; it also gave high-calibre lacrosse players the opportunity to make some money in central Canada for the first time since 1914. However, to give the I.P.L.L. sole credit for the rapid transition to box lacrosse would be to oversimplify the matter. The I.P.L.L. sparked the revolution, but there had been ongoing, underlying circumstances that made Canadian lacrosse ripe for change in 1931.

In the last half of the nineteenth century and up until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, lacrosse was the most popular sport in Canada, bar none. The game had gone through several trying periods in this era, as lacrosse — and Canadian society as a whole — grappled with the concept of professionalism in athletics. Numerous attempts were made by the governing bodies of lacrosse to eliminate money from the sport, but by 1905 open professionalism had become accepted. Professional lacrosse leagues flourished in central Canada and British Columbia, only to flounder first in the east and then in the west. This was the beginning to the demise of professional lacrosse in the east in 1911. Promoters cancelled a game in Toronto after a mild melee had broken out between fans and players. The promoters, hoping to stage a rematch and take in another game's gate receipts, tried to reschedule the game the following week. Fans, disgusted by what they considered a blatant attempt to pry one more time into their wallets, stayed away in droves.

The demise of professional lacrosse continued until 1914 when operations ceased in the east. Professional lacrosse in British Columbia, after going dormant for the First World War, struggled on until 1924, but died because of a lack of skilled players.

The first half of the 1920s were lean years for Canadian lacrosse. Hockey had taken over as the most popular sport in the country, and lacrosse found itself challenged by other summer sports. Baseball, soccer, and golf proved to be lacrosse's biggest competition for participants, playing space, and spectators. Baseball and soccer were particularly attractive, as neither required a great deal of equipment nor the necessary skills for lacrosse. As well, lacrosse had earned itself a reputation, perhaps rightly, as a brutal sport, one that few parents encouraged their children to take up.

The tide turned in 1925 when the provincial lacrosse bodies formed the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association (C.A.L.A.). The C.A.L.A. soon embarked on a campaign to sell lacrosse to youngsters. In 1926, the C.A.L.A. spent \$3 500 to send lacrosse guides to 6 500 schools across the country. It also appealed to the press to highlight the sport and to make note of its schoolboy campaign. The campaign soon began paying dividends. D.M. Graham of Runnymede Collegiate in Toronto reported that 225 boys were playing lacrosse at the school in 1931 and noted that "when lacrosse sticks appear on the school campus, baseballs disappear." Part of the success in the program at Runnymede Collegiate was removing any unnecessary slashing, ending the need for padding. Graham wrote that this ended the "prejudice of parents refusing to allow their boys to play lacrosse," and was "incidentally less expensive to operate."

This growth was also reflected in the number of playing certificates issued by the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association. The total number issued rose from 697 in 1927 to 1012 in 1930, the bulk of that growth coming in the younger age groupings. The midget grouping (15-17 years old) rose from 33 playing certificates in 1927 to 414 two years later, while the number of juvenile players (18-19 years old) rose from 92 to 145 in the same period. Lacrosse was also making great strides in other Ontario towns. In 1927, Cornwall had only one senior team and "one or two local leagues." By 1930, the town had 300 players in six leagues, 70% of whom were under 18 years of age. The sport was also being revived in Peterborough, Brockville, Kingston, and Smiths Falls. It would seem, at least in Ontario that the C.A.L.A. had managed to curb the downfall of lacrosse.

Lacrosse in Montreal was also regaining some of its previous stature. The region's premiere league, the five-team Quebec-Ontario Senior Lacrosse League (Q.O.S.L.L.), was entering its third season in 1931. In addition, the Ontario-Quebec Lacrosse Association (governing Quebec and eastern Ontario) announced that it would be organizing a junior league for the 1931 season. The game had declined badly in Montreal by 1923, but through the efforts of two stars of lacrosse's professional heyday, the game's fortunes began to change in short order. Paddy Brennan and Edouard "Newsy" Lalonde were the main influences behind the new senior league and lacrosse in the Montreal area in general. The Montreal Star noted that "lacrosse interest is at a high ebb around the M.A.A.A. (Montreal Amateur Athletic Association)," the very organization that had triggered the lacrosse boom some 50 years earlier. But with the renewed interest in lacrosse came some logistical problems.

In both Montreal and Toronto, there were not enough playing fields to accommodate the new teams and leagues. Lacrosse competed with soccer, baseball, and softball for this precious commodity in Montreal in 1931. The Verdun entry in the Q.O.S.L.L., led by Paddy Brennan, was having difficulty obtaining space for practices. The team played at Verdun's Blackburn Park, but could not "practice there as the soccer clubs have booked all the available hours." Another Q.O.S.L.L. team, the Knights of Columbus Lacrosse Club, moved to Ville St. Pierre because the field it used in 1930 was no longer available. Space was so tight at the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association that a softball team traded three pairs of lacrosse gloves they had found to the M.A.A.A. entry in the Q.O.S.L.L. in exchange for field time.

This same problem also hindered lacrosse in Toronto. The lacrosse revival's needs soon outgrew what the city's Parks Committee could accommodate. When the Parks Committee allotted its field space to various sporting groups for the 1931 summer season, the lacrosse community felt slighted. In a letter sent to the Parks Committee by the Toronto Lacrosse League, the O.A.L.A., and the Public School Lacrosse Association, the indignation and sarcasm were hardly veiled:

Toronto should be the lacrosse centre of the world and it will be if you gentlemen will only give us an even break. We desire to congratulate the Parks Department for the splendid way they equip their playing fields for other games than lacrosse.

The consortium of Toronto lacrosse interests was led by Charlie Querrie, a star from the heyday of lacrosse and a contemporary of Newsy Lalonde and Paddy Brennan. Querrie was perhaps the sport's biggest proponent and its most ubiquitous ambassador. While he remembered fondly the glory years of some twenty years past, he was a staunch defender of the 1931 crop of players. He thought that all they lacked was "the same encouragement, the same crowds and the same time to practice." The Parks Committee, however, wasn't forthcoming with encouragement or practice time. In a meeting with Parks Commissioner Chambers, a delegation led by Querrie seeking playing fields with stands was told that "lacrosse is not so prominent in our activities . . . on account of itself. Baseball receives consideration on account of its huge following." Chambers ended with a challenge: "It is for lacrosse to prove itself."

The game's problems were not only limited to field space. Lacrosse had internal problems, too. From its formal beginnings as a sport in 1867 up to 1931, one common theme ran through the annals of lacrosse — strong, sometimes headstrong, governing bodies. Lacrosse set the standard in Canada for sports organization, but it was not uncommon for there to be several groups governing simultaneously. More often than not, these bodies would compete rather than co-operate. This, understandably, led to poor, sometimes meddlesome, organization. George Vellathottam and Kevin Jones of York University claim that this was one of the sport's downfalls in the 1920s. The over-organization of lacrosse confused the press, who reacted by simply turning away from the game. That led in turn to public indifference toward lacrosse. To address this problem, the creation of the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association (C.A.L.A.) was created in 1925 to oversee and co-ordinate disparate provincial bodies. While the C.A.L.A. did make great strides in improving the appeal and profile of the game, the actions of one lacrosse governing body, the O.A.L.A., alienated its own players more than it drove away the press or the public.

In 1931, the O.A.L.A. announced that it would enforce the "residence rule" to the letter. The residence rule was simply this: players could only play for the team in whose district they were bona fide residents (meaning the player would have to live and work in the same district as their club). This regulation had been interpreted with a great degree of latitude in previous years, but 1931 was to be different. The O.A.L.A. was hoping to prevent what amounted to pseudo-professionalism, where players could be induced with money and employment (under the table), to switch residences in order to be eligible to play for

another club. The laxity with which the residence rule was enforced in previous years had been detrimental to the game. The Globe's Bert Perry predicted that, if it was not enforced, the O.A.L.A.'s senior league, its highest profile loop, would drop to only two teams; if the rule was enforced, the league would have a respectable six clubs. He reported that even the perennially strong St. Simon's club of Toronto was on the verge of folding because they "feel that they cannot carry on under the old order of things." The residence rule was enforced as promised, meaning that players no longer had the choice of where to play. That decision was now to be made for them by the O.A.L.A. They would have to play for the club in whose district they lived and worked. As Perry predicted, the O.A.L.A. senior league did get six entries, including St. Simon's.

One of the two teams that would have carried on under the old system according to Bert Perry's prediction, the Brampton Excelsiors, was none too amused by the change of circumstances. Brampton, defending Mann Cup champions, was on the verge of losing several key players because of the new interpretation of the residence rule. They saw the hammer come down on four Oshawa players hoping to play for a Toronto team, and this did not bode well for the Excelsiors. They reacted by ignoring the O.A.L.A. — literally. The club refused to attend meetings or submit playing certificates to the governing body, a move that found "little sympathy with fans of the town." The Globe complained that Brampton's form of protest threatened to "undo any progress that lacrosse has made in the past few years."

What could have been Brampton's motivation for such a seemingly self-destructive course of action? The answer probably lies in the International Professional Lacrosse League (I.P.L.L.), which was gearing up for its inaugural season. The same day as it was reported that the Excelsiors were ignoring the O.A.L.A., important news began circulating in Toronto sports circles. Brampton's Ted Reeve, probably the best amateur player of his day, was about to sign with the Montreal Maroons, one of the teams in the new professional box lacrosse venture. Although Brampton would eventually comply with the new interpretation of the residence rule, many of Reeve's teammates would follow him to the I.P.L.L. In July, a number of players were suspended by the O.A.L.A. for breaking the residence rule only to end up a few weeks later in the I.P.L.L. It would be wrong to conclude that the new version of the game sport pulled them away. The magnet was, of course, the opportunity to play for money.

However, the new stringent enforcement of the residence rule can hardly be discounted. It made the decision to sign with a professional team all the easier for a number of O.A.L.A. senior players.

The problems with governing bodies were not confined to Ontario — British Columbia had some of their own. Lacrosse, like almost every sport in Canada in 1931, fell under the auspices of the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada (A.A.U.C.). The A.A.U.C. had one guiding motive — to eliminate all elements of professionalism from Canadian sport. This included segregating amateurs from professionals. Unlike Toronto and Montreal, lacrosse was losing interest in Vancouver. The main problem lay in the A.A.U.C.'s decree of “once a professional, always a professional.” Whereas professional lacrosse had ended by 1914 in central Canada, it had continued until 1924 in British Columbia. This meant that the big names of the game in B.C. were prohibited from playing in amateur leagues. The loss of household names, on top of problems similar to those in central Canada, sent lacrosse in British Columbia into a lull. By 1931, only Vancouver and New Westminster were fielding senior teams.

Unlike Ontario, the British Columbia Amateur Lacrosse Association (B.C.A.L.A.) was willing to bend the rules for the first time since the demise of professional lacrosse in 1924. Amateur lacrosse had failed to produce any stars, so in an effort to rekindle public interest in the game, the B.C.A.L.A. agreed to let old professionals play alongside the current crop of amateurs. The B.C.A.L.A. passed a resolution that, if the A.A.U.C. did not sanction this “step toward the rejuvenation of senior lacrosse in British Columbia,” it would secede from the A.A.U.C. and proceed as it liked. This move was inspired by a recent change in the Dominion Football Union (D.F.U.), sanctioned by the A.A.U.C., that allowed for the mingling of amateurs and professionals. In response to the move by the B.C.A.L.A., J.I. Morkin, president of the A.A.U.C., warned that the new attitude toward professional athletes only applied to the D.F.U.

A compromise was eventually reached that allowed teams made up of professionals to play exhibition matches against amateur clubs. Although the B.C.A.L.A. did not get what it originally sought, it did eventually get the bankable names of west coast lacrosse back out before the public eye. More important, the stranglehold that the A.A.U.C. had on the sport was over. This created a vacuum in B.C. lacrosse, one in which anything could happen.

Thus, 1931 was a year of upheaval for Canadian lacrosse. Lack of field space was restricting the growth of the game in Montreal and Toronto. The enforcement of the residence rule in Ontario upset a great many senior players. And in British Columbia, a challenge to the A.A.U.C. was partially successful in bringing the big names of lacrosse back in the picture. The emergence of the I.P.L.L. also promised to bring about further changes in the sport, most notably moving it from a field to a smaller, enclosed, indoor playing surface and reducing the number of players from twelve to seven. These innovations proved to be the foundation on which box lacrosse was to build.

The planning stages of the I.P.L.L. began in April 1931, when it was announced that the league would start play in June and would include teams in Toronto, Baltimore, Boston, New York, and two in Montreal. The backers of the anticipated franchises, like the modifications they introduced in lacrosse, had a distinct hockey flavour. One Montreal franchise was to be owned by Joseph Cattarinich and Leo Dandurand, owners of the Montreal Canadiens Hockey Club. Charles Adams, who also owned the Boston Bruins, was hoping to buy the Boston entry, and Toronto was to be governed by Pete Campbell, an associate of Conn Smythe. The rationale for the Canadian cities chosen seems obvious. Less apparent is the reasoning behind the choices of American cities. Baltimore had long been the centre of American lacrosse, but the choices of Boston and New York seemed to have been an attempt to cash in on the emerging popularity of hockey in those cities, the sport that the I.P.L.L. was hoping to model. During April and May, the I.P.L.L.'s American content slowly dwindled. By early June, a few weeks before the anticipated start of play, the I.P.L.L. consisted of two Montreal teams, Toronto, and New York. The Canadian content got a boost when the New York franchise fell through, only to be replaced by Cornwall. Although a small town by most standards, Cornwall had long been a hotbed and a major player in lacrosse.

The I.P.L.L.'s similarities to hockey were not only to be in appearance and ownership. Three of the four teams drew their names directly from hockey teams in their cities. The Toronto franchise was named the Maple Leafs (but considering that the city's professional team also had that name, the naming of the I.P.L.L. team might speak more of the state the creative imagination in Toronto than it did of any attempt to cash in on hockey's popularity). The two Montreal clubs were named after their hockey counterparts, the Canadiens and the Maroons.

Cornwall settled on its traditional sporting team name, the Colts. There had been some attempts to name one of the Montreal franchises “the Shamrocks,” after one of the city’s great lacrosse clubs of years gone by, but the name Maroons won out. During lacrosse’s reign as Canada’s most popular game, Montreal’s great sporting rivalry had been between its three major lacrosse clubs — the Shamrocks, the Nationales, and the Montreal Lacrosse Club. This rivalry had gone dormant, being replaced by the standing hockey feud between the Maroons and the Canadiens. By naming the two Montreal I.P.L.L. entries after the two top hockey clubs in town, it was hoped “that the winter time rivalry should be repeated in some measure.”

The I.P.L.L.’s attempts at modeling itself after hockey disgusted more than a few people who felt that the indoor venture was nothing more than a quick money scheme. Bert Perry of The Globe saw the new indoor game, box lacrosse, as more than a bit peculiar. “Lacrosse is Canada’s national summer pastime, but why pervert and lure it indoors in the hot weather.” Andy Lytle of The Vancouver Sun had a hard time understanding the nuances of the new sport, but he believed he had a good handle on the I.P.L.L.’s prime motivation. “Hockey men recognize the new game as something to keep the arenas going nicely, thank you, from a box office standpoint, in the off-season for hockey.” Ed Baker of The Ottawa Citizen adopted a critical attitude: “....to old time lacrosse fans who saw the game at its best . . . it would not appear to appear like lacrosse.” While many sports pundits of the day had legitimate grounds for thinking that lacrosse had been hijacked by powerful hockey interests at the expense of the game’s old guard, there was more to it.

Hockey interests certainly did play a large role in the new league. Both Montreal teams were owned by their hockey counterparts. Leo Dandurand and Joseph Cattaranich owned both the hockey and lacrosse Canadiens; Tom Arnold, a controlling figure in the Maroons hockey organization, did the same with its sister lacrosse club. Pete Campbell, who had the rights to the lacrosse Maple Leafs, had owned the Toronto St. Patricks, the N.H.L. team that would become the Maple Leafs in 1927. Only the Cornwall Colts were owned by a bona fide lacrosse man, Joseph Lally, a renowned player and coach during the game’s golden era. Lally also owned the world’s largest lacrosse stick factory, so any venture that increased the game’s exposure was as good for his bottom line as it was for lacrosse. At face value, the critics might have had grounds for thinking that the I.P.L.L. was nothing more than a scheme to make money.

But if one goes beyond the names and takes a harder look at some of these men, their lacrosse credentials become a little more apparent. Take, for instance, Canadiens' owner Leo Dandurand. In 1931, he was known for his many business ventures, but Dandurand had initially gained fame as a star with the Nationales of professional lacrosse before the First World War. His business partner Joseph Cattaranich also had played lacrosse at a high level. Dandurand knew full well that hockey had come to stay, but he decided to pump new blood into the sport that had made him famous:

Se souvenant des beaux jours ou le jeu de crosse procurait aux inities ces frissons qu'on oublie jamais, notre grand metteur en scene (Dandurand) resolut de faire revivre ce sport, mais sous une forme modifiee.

(Remembering the glory days when lacrosse gave fans unforgettable chills, Dandurand resolved to revive the sport, but in a modified form.)

The other hockey men, however, did not share any of Dandurand's lacrosse experience. Joseph Lally, however, on top of his lacrosse stick factory, had credentials within the sport that few could match. He had been one of the game's biggest promoters during the lean years of the 1920s. Lally also had been one of the founders of the C.A.L.A. in 1925, and he was largely responsible for the lacrosse revival taking place in Cornwall. While Lally's business rose and fell with fluctuations of in the popularity of lacrosse, he was also a member of the lacrosse old guard that critics contended was being alienated by the I.P.L.L.

If some in the press were quick to label I.P.L.L. ownership as hockey-first businessmen, the same certainly could not be said of the men hired to run the clubs. The big names of a previous era were well represented within the league's coaches and managers. "Newsy" Lalonde coached the Canadiens and a rival from his playing days, Paddy Brennan, coached the Maroons. Charlie Querrie, the dean of Toronto lacrosse, helped organize the Toronto club and would play an active role in that city's box lacrosse scene. Longtime lacrosse people not only filled managerial positions in the I.P.L.L., they also filled the stands. The league's first game in Montreal brought out "the old-time lacrosse players, fans and diehards . . . The general opinion was that the game had come above expectations." The reception the new game received in Toronto was no less optimistic: "If there were any who went to jeer, they remained to themselves. The roars of approval indicated that the spectators were enjoying themselves."

Eddie Livingstone, “one of Canada’s leading sports authorities,” noted the improvements that the I.P.L.L. had brought to the game:

While I always have been a supporter of orthodox Lacrosse, I, along with many others, realized that large playing fields militated against exciting plays following along in rapid succession — dangerous and scoring opportunities come too far and few between. These features are among the strongest points of indoor lacrosse.

Robert Reade, in a feature on the I.P.L.L. in August 1931, noted that “at first almost their only capital was hockey goodwill,” meaning the league could exploit already fiery hockey rivalries.

The I.P.L.L. also had a great asset in the fact that it was a professional league. The A.A.U.C.’s decree of “once a professional, always a professional” carried over from one sport to another. For example, an athlete who played professional hockey could not play amateur lacrosse. And with no professional lacrosse league in central Canada from 1915 to 1931, this meant a generation of household names from the ranks of professional hockey, many of whom were exceptional lacrosse players, could not play lacrosse anywhere. This changed with the advent of the I.P.L.L. Now the big names of Canada’s new national game could play the old one, too. To a sports-crazed public, the opportunity to see the likes of Nels Stewart and Hooley Smith do anything was cause for a gathering. One professional hockey player in particular proved to be a boon to the I.P.L.L., Lionel Conacher. He excelled at every sport he tried, but it was in lacrosse that he found his talents were best suited. In 1923, advertisements for lacrosse games in Toronto featured the Conacher name above anything else. His name would get top billing on the marquee in 1931, too.

With Conacher on board, the I.P.L.L. not only got a hockey star, but a lacrosse legend. Basil O’Meara of The Montreal Star saw the return of professional hockey players to the game as crucial to the new league’s success: “There are names that mean something in the sports world and it isn’t a haphazard venture but a carefully thought out project . . . ” Conacher, Stewart, and Smith all played for the Maroons, as they did in hockey. Considering that both Maroons teams were run, to some extent, by Tom Arnold, it seemed sensible to use the bankable names of hockey to help sell the new lacrosse team.

The Maroons, however, were the only I.P.L.L. club to use professional hockey players to any great extent. Cornwall drew its players from prewar professionals, local leagues, nearby First Nations communities, and even American college ranks. Both Toronto and the Canadiens relied heavily on talent from local senior amateur leagues. In the case of the Canadiens, this may have been an indication of the lacrosse ability of the hockey-playing Habs, or lack thereof. Dandurand and Cattaranich, owning both Canadiens clubs, must have surely wanted to exploit the marquee value of any of their hockey players for the I.P.L.L. Instead, they had to rely on amateur lacrosse players to fill their roster.

This was not the case in Toronto. The hockey Maple Leafs were loaded with talented lacrosse players. When looking at team owners in the I.P.L.L., one name is conspicuous because of its absence: Conn Smythe, owner of the Maple Leaf hockey club. He was too busy trying to complete construction and financing of Maple Leaf Gardens to get involved, so the I.P.L.L.'s Toronto franchise went to a business associate of his, Pete Campbell. Toronto was no less hockey-mad than Montreal, and hockey players like Ace Bailey and Charlie Conacher were as popular in Toronto as Nels Stewart and Lionel Conacher were in Montreal. Bailey and Charlie Conacher, along with other hockey Maple Leafs Hap Day, Harold Cotton and Harvey Jackson, were told by Conn Smythe to forget any idea of playing professional lacrosse. Smythe didn't want to risk losing some of his biggest names for the 1931-32 hockey season, one that could make or break him and his new building. Pete Campbell, owner of the I.P.L.L. Maple Leafs, was willing to accept this fact, but Charlie Conacher was not, wanting to join his brother Lionel in Montreal if he could not play lacrosse in Toronto. Campbell warned him that "with Maple Leaf Gardens progressing so rapidly it is important that you take no risks." Conacher gave in, as did Ace Bailey, who spent the summer of 1931 selling stock in Smythe's new hockey palace. "My interests are aligned with the Toronto Maple Leaf Hockey Club and the new arena, and I do not care to risk injury by participating in other sports," Bailey said in mid-July. Ironically, just a few days earlier, the hockey Leafs played a charity baseball game against Toronto's professional baseball team, also named the Maple Leafs.

With bankable hockey names not available to Pete Campbell, he soon sought the next best thing - the stars of the senior Ontario amateur field lacrosse. "I went out and got lacrosse players. I didn't try to make hockey reputations stand up in this game," Campbell said, not that he had much choice about signing hockey players.

The six teams of the O.A.L.A.'s senior league proved to be the I.P.L.L.'s richest source of talent. Brampton alone lost six players. Oshawa and both Toronto clubs, St. Simon's and Native Sons, lost some of their big names to the professional box league. The Quebec-Ontario senior amateur circuit was also scavenged for players. Some pundits warned amateurs to wait a year to see if the I.P.L.L. was going to be viable, because if it failed they could "kiss (their) amateur card goodbye." It seemed not many were willing to listen to the advice. While not as many left the Q.O.S.L.L. for the I.P.L.L. as the O.A.L.A., the players that did go were hard to replace. The first amateur casualty from the Quebec-Ontario circuit came in Cornwall in late June, just a week into the I.P.L.L.'s inaugural season. Canada's self-proclaimed "Lacrosse Town" had only been granted an I.P.L.L. franchise on June 20, after the New York entry pulled out due to difficulties in arranging for a lighted field. The town was ecstatic, but "the Colts (amateur of the Q.O.S.L.L.) are being temporarily forgotten for the present, while all the interest is centred on the newest innovation in the sporting world 'box' lacrosse." It seems Cornwall was not big enough to support both a professional box and a senior amateur field team.

Cornwall, though, was to be the exception. Senior amateur lacrosse in the other I.P.L.L. cities continued on. However, these amateurs were willing to take a hint from the professional venture. As quickly as box lacrosse had pushed the field game out of Cornwall, amateurs in other centres picked up the new innovation. The amateurs in Montreal were the first. In early June, an intermediate (one age grouping below senior) amateur box lacrosse league was formed. The league was given an instant shot of credibility when "Newsy" Lalonde announced that he would donate a cup bearing his name to be awarded to the league champion. Montreal's intermediate amateur box loop got under way on June 21, 1931, two days before the I.P.L.L.'s inaugural game. Basil O'Meara of The Montreal Star had no doubts that the box version was not just a fad and that the field game was doomed:

Why not just call it lacrosse, and let it go at that, because the amateurs are going to play the bobtailed game, and it looks perhaps like the game of the future and perhaps the salvation of the grand old pastime . . .

The Quebec-Ontario senior circuit continued on playing field lacrosse. Unlike their intermediate counterparts, the seniors tried to salvage the rest of the outdoor season. The league was reduced to three clubs after Cornwall and Ottawa pulled out. Rather than abandon the season altogether, Verdun, M.A.A.A., and St. Pierre struggled on. The decision to carry on may have had more to do with the state of Ontario lacrosse than anything else. With the 1930 Mann Cup champion Brampton Excelsiors losing six players to the I.P.L.L., it was felt that the Quebec-Ontario Senior Lacrosse League champion had a very real shot at winning the Mann Cup. There was an added incentive to win the Mann Cup in 1931; the winner would represent Canada at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Neither the Mann Cup nor Los Angeles would be in the works for the Quebec-Ontario champion M.A.A.A. Those honours would go, again, to the repeat O.A.L.A. senior champion, Brampton.

After the M.A.A.A.'s defeat, Paddy Brennan tried, unsuccessfully, to arrange Montreal's first senior amateur box lacrosse game between them and his own Verdun squad at the Forum. Brennan, however, would not give up on the condensed game. He donated a trophy bearing his name to a junior West Montreal box lacrosse league starting play in the autumn of 1931. The new version of lacrosse would find favour in other Quebec-Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association centres, most notably Cornwall.

The I.P.L.L. essentially killed senior field lacrosse in Cornwall, but very few of the now-idle amateurs found spots in the professional league. But this didn't stop them from trying their hand at the abbreviated game. The Cornwall Freeholder reported that "box lacrosse has come, has been seen, and has conquered," and the fans were not the only ones who were won over. Players from the defunct field team would take part in a missionary campaign on behalf of box lacrosse in eastern Ontario in the summer of 1931. A team comprised largely of the defunct senior club played an exhibition match with the St. Regis Indians in Brockville before a large crowd in late July. By late August, a box team was formed there. The same two teams staged an exhibition in Prescott in early September. A few days later, an autumn indoor league was formed that included Brockville, Prescott, Cardinal, and Smiths Falls. The Cornwall Freeholder noted of box lacrosse, "it allows even smaller communities to field a seven-man team." Amateur box lacrosse did not appear in Cornwall until October 1931, when a three-team city league was formed.

The league president Ambrose DeGray, a member of the I.P.L.L.'s Cornwall Colts, and one team was coached by one of his teammates, John White. Amateurs in both Cornwall and Montreal were quick to take up the new game. The demise of the field team in Cornwall left players with few options. And in Montreal, it was intermediate and junior age amateurs who took up box lacrosse first. But it was in Toronto that the box and field versions went head-to-head at the senior amateur level.

The 1931 season in Ontario was as turbulent as they come. The enforcement of the residence rule and the emergence of the I.P.L.L. had changed the face of the game. The Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association began to stumble beneath its own weight, thanks mostly to its own stricter reading of the residence rule. On July 7, 1931, the O.A.L.A. seniors decided to form a box lacrosse league with or without the O.A.L.A.'s sanction. The players agreed to play in co-operation with the O.A.L.A., but did not want to be controlled by it. Part of the O.A.L.A. executive resented this declaration of independence and had to be coerced into recognizing the new league. The games were played at Sunnyside Stadium, which had been originally designed for softball. The new league was such an instant success with fans that softball games were rescheduled to fit in more box lacrosse. The league received a blessing from on high when the dean of Toronto lacrosse, Charlie Querrie, donated a trophy bearing his name to the league.

This is not to say that the O.A.L.A. seniors abandoned the field game. The six-team field league carried on simultaneously with the box league, consisting of the same players and teams. If there ever was an opportunity for a comparison of the two variations of lacrosse, this was it. However, not too many fans were interested in comparing. Throughout the summer, the box league attracted more and more fans, while the field game went largely unnoticed. This is surprising, considering the Mann Cup was still the championship of the field game and box lacrosse did not have any higher, national level to which to aspire - yet.

The formation of the Sunnyside Box Lacrosse League may have been met with the approval of the paying fan, but it still had some pundits questioning its rationale. The Globe's Mike Rodden thought that it "savor(ed) pretty much of a money-making scheme." He wondered why any team would risk its chances at the Mann Cup by taking part. While contending with the maverick box league, the O.A.L.A. still had to enforce the residence rule.

In August, it suspended the playing certificates of four members of the Native Sons team. The club challenged the O.A.L.A. by seeking a court injunction, and the O.A.L.A. President W.J. Blainey gave in: "I, as President, in the interest of the game, in view of what we have lost to the professional ranks, (agree) that we shall allow certificates in good standing" to the four players. This decision was partially reversed less than a week later, when two of the four players were once again suspended. If the O.A.L.A. seemed out of control, that's because it was. Mike Rodden noted that the "O.A.L.A. ship will likely flounder unless conditions change."

While the Sunnyside Box Lacrosse League was steadily drawing an increasing number of fans, its field counterpart was quickly losing credibility. A field playoff game between Brampton and St. Simon's left fans in a bitter mood, not unlike the 1911 debacle that began the demise of professional field lacrosse. After the game ended in a tie, St. Simon's refused to play into overtime. They preferred instead to replay the game, presumably to draw another gate. This resulted in a near riot in the stands. O.A.L.A. President W.J. Blainey was criticized for his inability to deal with the situation, furthering the decline in that governing body's credibility. Mike Rodden was disgusted, stating "the death knell of the twelve-man game had been sounded." Rodden, once a critic of senior amateur box lacrosse, soon became one of its biggest proponents.

The O.A.L.A. was faced with a number of challenges in the summer of 1931. Its declaration of strict enforcement of the residence rule in April set the tone. Its powers were undermined by the new professional league, which gave the O.A.L.A.'s best talent an option, and a paying one at that. When the choice came down to playing where the O.A.L.A. deemed right or making some money, the decision was an easy one. And, when the O.A.L.A. senior players saw the initial popularity of the I.P.L.L. and tried to cash in on the buzz surrounding the new game by forming their own league, the O.A.L.A. had no choice to let them. Box lacrosse not only stole the spectator from the field game, it also sabotaged its governing body.

This is not to say that senior amateur box lacrosse in Toronto acted as some kind of fifth column, reeking havoc on the sport. Much like the Cornwall senior amateurs, teams from the Sunnyside Box Lacrosse League played exhibition games all over southern Ontario with evangelical zeal, reaping converts in numbers that any tent preacher would envy.

Matches at Brantford, Woodstock, and Orangeville all resulted in the formation of box lacrosse teams in those towns. By early September, it was evident that box lacrosse had sparked a revival in the sport, thanks in large measure to the Sunnyside renegades.

The flirtation with the new innovation was consummated on September 10, 1931, when the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association adopted box lacrosse as its official version, making the recently contested 1931 Mann Cup the last one to be played under field rules. Few people seemed to mourn the demise of the field game. The main concern of both The Globe and The Toronto Star was how the switch would affect Canada's ability to play international lacrosse. The Toronto Star noted the resounding welcome the news received in British Columbia. The problem in the west had long been the shortage of talent to fill a twelve-player roster, one which the C.A.L.A.'s decision helped solve.

Andy Lytle of The Vancouver Sun, saw the decision as the salvation of west coast lacrosse: "There are players of sufficient class in Vancouver and New Westminster to put the new game across just as well next year as was done in the east this season." He believed that the key to the revival lay in the reinstatement of the old professionals, a goal that the C.A.L.A. agreed to help the B.C.A.L.A. try to achieve.

The return of the old professionals in July 1931 created a great deal of interest in the sport. Although they only played exhibition matches, the public took notice. On July 14, the once-household names of west coast lacrosse came out of their forced retirement to play the senior amateur Vancouver club. The game was notable for more than just the return of the old pros; it also marked the debut of box lacrosse in British Columbia. The success of the I.P.L.L. in the east had not gone unnoticed. A number of box games were staged throughout the rest of the summer, each drawing more fans than the last. Even without the I.P.L.L., the time was right for a change in B.C. lacrosse. By the time of the C.A.L.A. decision to adopt box lacrosse as the official version of the sport, the seeds of the condensed game had already been sown on the west coast, in what would prove to be very fertile soil.

British Columbia lacrosse would boom in the 1930s and 1940s, becoming a "summer staple" for sports fans. Any doubts about the new version were dismissed after the 1933 Mann Cup, perhaps the best senior championship series ever staged. At the final game between the Hamilton Tigers and New Westminster Salmonbellies, 11 000 fans packed

Vancouver's Denman Street Arena and thousands more were turned away. While it took the west coast a couple of years to embrace the new game wholeheartedly, Ontario took to the sport right away. Close to one hundred delegates attended a meeting of the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association in December 1931. The Globe noted that "practically every town which has a rink, or a large enough enclosure for box lacrosse, has a team." In less than a year, Canadian lacrosse had turned on its head and was remarkably better off for it.

The initial successes of the new game would be consolidated over the next few years. Although the I.P.L.L., the force that had kick-started box lacrosse, was a success in 1931, it would die halfway through its sophomore season. This, however, did not dampen the revolution it began. "Boxla" as the new version would sometimes be called, spread from the lower mainland of British Columbia into the interior of the province and Vancouver Island over the next decade. The Montreal Senior Amateur Lacrosse League played out of the Forum in the 1930s. The new box league had eight clubs, as compared to three teams in that last year of senior field competition, 1931. An eastern Ontario writer, Dane Lanken, noted that "every Canadian town had a 'boxla' team in the '30s . . ." While perhaps a bit overstated, Lanken made a good case for the revival of interest and participation that the new game created in eastern Ontario. In the 1930s, box lacrosse was the game in places like Alexandria. Ottawa, which didn't get a chance to witness box lacrosse in 1931, saw its city senior league switch from the field game to indoor for the start of the 1932 season. The new game would also soon be played in Winnipeg, where "box lacrosse took on with a bang when it was introduced" in the spring of 1932.

With the possible exception of British Columbia, the lacrosse revival was most profound in small-town southern Ontario. This area had been the bedrock of lacrosse in the 19th century, but the sports' appeal had eroded there much like it had elsewhere. In 1931, the heart of the revival was in Toronto, which pumped new blood into the veins of southern Ontario lacrosse, and the transfusion was an undeniable success. Not long after the C.A.L.A.'s adoption of the new game, it was estimated that there were 125 organized teams with 2 120 players, more than double the number of participants in the second-last year of the field game, 1930. In rural Peel County, which included the stronghold of Brampton, lacrosse was only played in a few towns in 1931. The switch to the box game led to a boom that saw the sport engulf the whole county in a few short years.

In 1935, J.E.G. Curran, a lacrosse player of renown at the turn of the century noted the decline and the resurgence of the game in his hometown of Orillia - “But when 1931 saw lacrosse in its remodeled form sweep back into popularity, Orillia was right there.” And he was not about to look back: “No one, from here to Toronto and return, spoke of going back to the old twelve-man style . . . It was all ‘box’.” In small-town southern Ontario, lacrosse, (albeit in a different form), was back.

The transition of lacrosse from the field game to “boxla” was nothing short of a revolution. The sport was growing incrementally in the late 1920s, but the infrastructure of city parks departments in Montreal and Toronto did not grow in proportion. In addition, the strength of governing bodies in 1931 (both of lacrosse and amateur sport in general), was challenged and wounded. The advent of a professional box lacrosse league employing many popular hockey heroes brought the sport before a wider audience. But none of these factors, taken individually or collectively, can fully account for the rapid change. The old field game was developed and nurtured in Canada, but by 1931 it had become the forte of other nations. Box lacrosse, however, was never accepted by other lacrosse-playing countries. The marriage of lacrosse and hockey produced the quintessential Canadian sport, one that only we could fully appreciate. And like almost all true Canadian treasures, its birthplace might have been urban, but it flourished in the hinterland.