

Interview: Frank Selke Sr, 1973
Interviewer unknown

Q: What killed lacrosse in Toronto? Why did it survive in other centres?

FS: Because it's a wonderful game, as good a game as there is in this world. I owe a lot to hockey, and I think hockey is a wonderful game. And so is football. Baseball is.....well, I managed teams, and I like it, but it doesn't compare with football or hockey or lacrosse. I found that my players [*on his Toronto baseball team*] were buying Model T Fords, and I couldn't man a baseball team on a Saturday afternoon. They were up in Coboconk or someplace else with their families, so after struggling with it for two years, I quit. The same thing happened to Toronto lacrosse....There were no customers for lacrosse.

Q: Were there other difficulties — organizational weaknesses, rising real estate values, etc.,?

FS: No, this wasn't the case. But according to Charlie Querrie, who took Tecumsehs to England for a series of games, the results of the Labour Day game in 1911 scared a lot of people. The Torontos were playing the Tecumsehs at Hanlan's Point. 18,000 were there. Near the end of the game, a fight broke out on the field, and thousands swarmed off the stands onto the field, and it was just a riot. I don't think anyone was seriously hurt, but there was a lot of pushing and shoving. And the astute Charlie Querrie ran over to Jimmy Murphy, the coach of the Torontos, and he indicated that there was no way to clear the field, and why didn't they replay the game next Saturday? You know, get another gate. And according to Charlie Querrie, that did more to sour the people to lacrosse. They just wouldn't go for this, to play an extra game to milk the public.

The roughness was greatly exaggerated, and I honestly think it had nothing to do with it [*lacrosse's demise*] because whether it's in baseball, or football, or hockey, if the people know that there's going to be fisticuffs or trouble, they swarm. They want to see it. I don't think that the game was especially rough, though there were instances [*of violence resulting in injury or death*].

[The transcript then summarizes an anecdote Selke told: *Then related the incident in which Eddie Powers knocked out Daredevil Gauthier, kicking him in the groin and slashed him across the face the end of his stick. Powers invited by Murphy to try out for the Torontos - this in Torontos-Montreal Nationales game. Powers had allowed Gauthier to go around him several times in the first half. Powers was told by Murphy that if it happened again, he (Powers) would be back on the farm. After Gauthier was carried off the field, Murphy said "You'll do, Powers." This sort of incident "didn't happen very often."*]

Q: Did baseball go the same route as lacrosse, or did it last longer? If the latter, why?

FS: Baseball lasted quite a bit longer than lacrosse into the 30's. It's not as good a game, but

the International League at the time was a very good league, and you could go to Hanlan's Point.... and see the greatest players. Now they are scattered all over creation. It's like the National Hockey League, it's expanded so much. Many of these men played for Toronto. Perhaps lacrosse died quicker than baseball because baseball is largely dominated by U.S. city teams. This kept it before the public, and it was promoted better.

Q: Did putting the game indoors - box lacrosse - hurt the game?

FS: The year we finished the [*Maple Leaf*] Gardens, they introduced box lacrosse in Montreal the Maroons and Canadiens were two teams. I can't remember the other, but it was heralded as the coming thing. This was going to be the great game. They reduced it from eleven men to seven....and we used this in our sales talks that lacrosse was going to keep the arena occupied in the summertime. And that year Brampton won the Mann Cup, the Intermediate, Junior, and Juvenile championships of Canada, and Bucko McDonald was young enough to play for all four teams....Bucko has to be one of the greatest lacrosse players that ever lived. Eddie Powers was coach the Brampton team. Pete Campbell, a Toronto stockbroker with an interest in the Maple Leaf baseball team, offered to bring the Tecumsehs together again if [Conn] Smythe would organize a team, and with the Montreal teams and possibly from New York. Eddie Powers was made coach, and he arranged for the Brampton players to join the Maple Leafs

[Detailed how Selke ended up signing lacrosse players]

In 1931, the worst year of the Depression, we owed the Canadian Bank of Commerce \$900,000. We owed Eaton's \$300,000 for the land, and Thompson Bros. Construction Co. \$75,000 towards the building on a slow note. Smythe and I were not financiers we were sports people and hockey buffs, and by golly we had troubles, but we weathered it, thank goodness. So we started to play, and to everybody's surprise, the game didn't go. We thought that we might spur some interest if we got the U.S. into it. So through Col. Hammond, who was president of Madison Square Gardens at the time, we played a game. The Montreal Canadiens versus the Toronto Maple Leafs [for charity]. We filled the house, and it was a terrific game. Mike Rodden was the referee. Mike was a tough cookie....Ty Silk was badly cut in the head, and the game was considered too bloody for the Americans. By mid-summer, the two Montreal teams folded, and Mr Smythe told me to disband the Maple Leafs. The people wouldn't come. I had signed these people to contracts and felt obligated, but Mr Smythe said that that would have been the case if the team had folded, but the league had and hence the team was under no legal obligation to fulfill the contracts. I said, "Sure, so I'm the patsy." So Mr Smythe told me to make whatever settlement I could. I didn't quibble with the boys. I paid a lump sum and said that they could continue playing on a cash basis.

[At this point Selke told a long story on how he moved Bucko McDonald from lacrosse to hockey player, with a personal cheque from Smythe for \$1,000 because Smythe wouldn't risk Gardens' money, but he would his own to teach McDonald how to skate. The next year McDonald returned to training camp and was sent to Buffalo with Flash Hollett. When Hollett was sent on to Ottawa, McDonald was benched in Buffalo. McDonald was upset by this and accused Smythe of trying to keep him out of hockey. Smythe, always a hot-tempered fellow, flew at Selke and made

McDonald a free agent. McDonald went to Detroit, a fine checker, not at all dirty]

Anyway, after the pro league folded, lacrosse was reorganized. Orillia joined [*O.A.L.A. Senior*] and won the Mann Cup four years in a row with Red Storey and Eddie Powers Junior. Discipline was what made them good, especially when Eddie Powers Sr coached them a fine disciplinarian. But this is pretty far from the topic.

Q: How did lacrosse survive in towns like Brampton?

FS: Because in the small towns, it's your team; while in the big city, it belongs to the other guy. It's a commercial operation and an entirely different thing.

[Note: That matches Roy MacGregor's comment in Aug 73 Macleans: Lacrosse always has been town against town, not team against team. The sport is an expression of rural envy and indignation]

The only professional organization that now comes close to that [*sense of community identification*] are the Montreal Canadiens. It's their club.

We lost \$20,000 on the professional lacrosse club with Smythe, and we lost \$7,000 the next year on amateur lacrosse and \$6,000 the year after that. And I said to Mr Smythe, "You and I like the sport, but J.P. Bickell and G.R. Cockell and the other big shots who run this thing [*Maple Leaf Gardens*] are going to call you and I in one day and say "Look here, you've lost so much money. Why keep it going?" And I convinced him to stop it.

[Then relates memories of Gene Dopp, a SW Ontario lacrosse and hockey star, also football, who was the Secretary Treasurer of the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association. Had been on public relations staff of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co., who allowed him as much time as needed for this post. "No man living could have done more than he did to keep the game of lacrosse alive, just out of pure love for the game." Indicates that he arranged a Mann Cup final between an Indian team from B.C. (Note: Squamish Indians, 1936) and Orillia. Orillia team won, was "too big and strong and brutal for them." An awfully dirty series, seen by Attorney General of B.C.. Attempts were made (of an unspecified nature) to clean up the series and the game. Notes that Lance Issacs, an Indian member of the Toronto Marlboros was killed during a game with the Brampton team, being hit hard accidentally, rupturing a blood vessel; the coroner, Smirle Lawson (Note: member of Canadian Football Hall of Fame) brought in a verdict of accidental death. Selke felt that one dirty team, which was Orillia, gave the sport a bad name.]

Q: Was there much violence and fatalities during this period?

FS: No, I can only remember two casualties: this boy in lacrosse and Bill Masterson.

[Series of non-lacrosse questions. See handwritten section at the end of this transcript for questions re: Selke's business interests in sports, differences in how Montreal and Toronto view

their sports teams.]

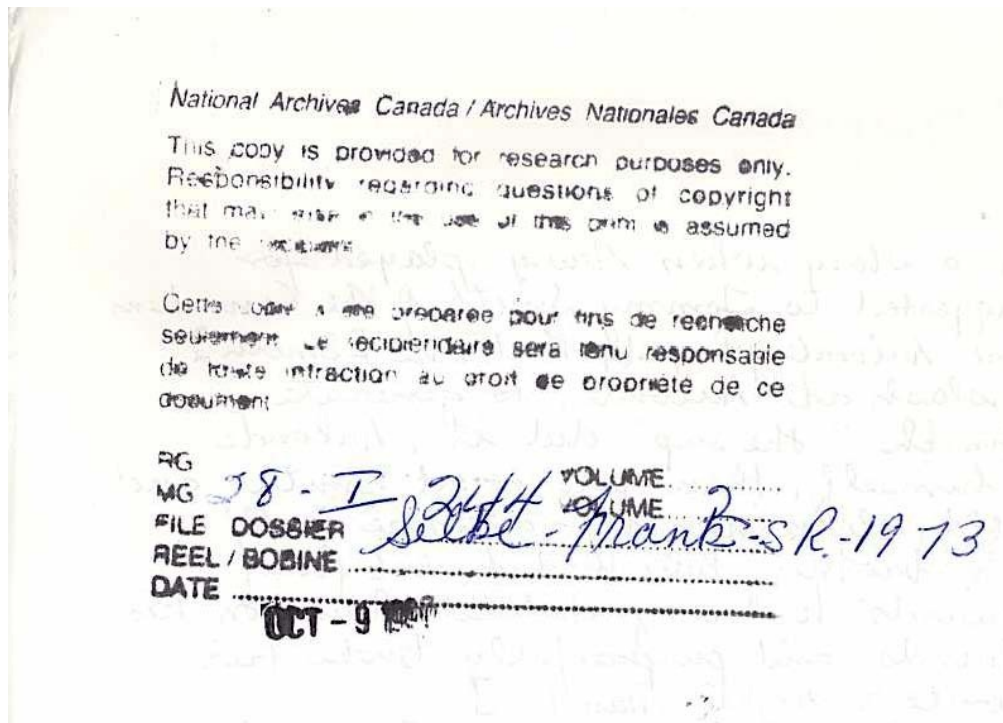
Q: Back to lacrosse. Who was the highest paid player?

FS: The highest paid lacrosse player was Newsy Lalonde. He signed with Hol (?) Solman of the Tecumsehs for \$1, 000 a season, but jumped his contract to go off to Vancouver to play for Con Jones, who offered him \$5, 000 a year. Rather than travel through Toronto for fear of being attacked and taken off the train, Lalonde went to Vancouver via the U.S., played for a year, then returned to play hockey. He was as mean a player as ever played.

[Related a story when Newsy played for Ottawa and suggested to Tommy Smith of Canadiens in the first game Lalonde played, that Smith should make a slash at Lalonde to generate excitement. Smith, "the sap," did it, and Lalonde purposely cut himself, then pole-axed Smith and knocked him cold, claiming self-defence. Alf Smith, Tommy's brother, who had a club foot, went up afterwards to "congratulate" Newsy on his game, shook hands and purposefully broke two fingers in Lalonde's right hand. Selke agreed with Joe Lally, "the grandfather of lacrosse," that sportsmen today not as dedicated as they used to be. Detailed Lally's extensive conditioning programme, even at a later age]

Q: Who qualified as the all-around athlete?

FS: Without a doubt, Charlie Conacher. I would rate Maurice Richard and perhaps Gordie Howe as better hockey players, and I think Howe would've succeeded at any sport he tried. But Charlie Conacher could do anything better than anyone I knew. Conacher was paid \$9,000 to play professional hockey. Lionel Conacher, with football, was years ahead of his time.



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in lacrosse, and Bill Masterson.

How did you go into team management?
I was not a good player, but I had the knack
of organizing. As I mentioned in my book, I played
hockey as a kid, but when I discovered that I wasn't
good enough, I was broken-hearted. So the teacher
suggested I organize, and I did. The reason I won't
take a back step away from anybody is because the
only team ^{I was involved with} from 1905 until I retired in which I did
not have a financial interest was the University of
Toronto Schools team, for which I was the honorary
coach, and of course they weren't going to take any
money for me. I didn't have money like the Molsons
but pro. rata I had just as big a stake as anybody
in the business. I took a mortgage on my house in
Toronto to buy stock in Maple Leaf Gardens... It was

fabulous for those who stayed with it. I was always a pussy-footie, never a big-shot, to join in the noi-falloy. [Told long story concerned with construction of Maple Leaf Gardens; first board meeting found tenders higher, and sale of stock lower, than anticipated, felt necessary to defer construction - Selke a member of Trades & Labour Council as representative of Electricians Union, convinced them that only way to get building built, & construction industry invigorated and convinced them to take 20% of wages in stock - Sir John Aird (?), Pres. of Can. Bank of Commerce, so impressed by this, took \$10,000 more in stock, J.P. Beckell, Pres. of McIntyre Mines also invests \$10,000 more - "Anyone who stuck, made money." - when he went to Montreal, Selke sold all common stock at \$75 a share, received it for nothing - found one share stuck in drawer later, sold it for \$540. - get 3 1/2% of proceeds of any stock he sold]

How did you keep going financially in your early years?

I had good bosses as an electrician, and they let me have as much time off as I wanted. Smythe offered me a job as his assistant, for \$3,000. He was very good to me & I have complaints about it. But I also think I was good for the game. I always said - & I think Smythe got tired of hearing it - as long as you keep the game [of hockey] on a high plane, the money will take care of itself. The minute you worry about the money and not the attraction, then you're going to have trouble. To charge ten or twelve dollars for a hockey ticket - who can afford it? Mind you, they have to, with the salaries they pay the players. Only the big firms can afford it, and they'll leave you faster than you can say. They have no sentiment. We had 1800 shareholders in Toronto, and I tried to emphasize that this was the public's team.

Do you think that Toronto (and Ontario) and Montreal (and Quebec) treat their teams and sports differently?

I would say yes. It's a difficult question. Mr. David Molson succeeded Senator David Molson, & off the record, it was a sorry day for hockey and for the Forum. But the Senator wanted to do something nice for his cousin, so he put David in charge. David kept harping to me that I fussed too much about the public. I'd go to any extreme to oblige anybody. [Relates incident when David Molson went for cruise up Mackenzie River, found that school children, who hadn't any hockey equipment were playing with sticks sent them by Selke - also found that Smythe & Toronto organization had refused the request similarly made, in an insulting way - Molson took pride in this, Selke asks "Why do you allow Sam Pollock and ~~Howard Hampton~~ Howard Hampton (?) abuse the people like they do?" Molson responded "I didn't hire those people to win a popularity contest." And Selke responded that "You'll see the day you said that."

[Selke didn't make it too clear, but he seemed to think that Montreal treated its teams as a public trust, while Toronto saw the Maple Leafs as a commercial organization. The Montreal ownership developed this kind of response, the Toronto management weren't interested.]

Back to lacrosse -

The highest paid lacrosse player was Newsy Lalonde. He signed with Hol Solman of the Tecumseh's for \$1,000 a season, but jumped his contract to go to Vancouver to play for Con Jones, who offered him \$5,000 a year. Rather than travel through Toronto, for fear of being attacked and taken off the train, Lalonde went to Vancouver via the U.S., played for a year, then returned to play hockey. He was as mean a player as ever.