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Is Lacrosse What it Used to Be?

By FRED JACOB
ILLUSTRATED BY LOU SKUCE

WHENEVER a man who plays or admires Canada's national game hears the assertion, "Lacrosse is coming back," he feels intensely irritated. An outsider might think his attitude a trifle illogical, as there is a certain amount of optimism in that statement. But the crumb of optimism is offset by the whole assumption on which the statement is based. It suggests that lacrosse has been put away somewhere for an interval, and that it is being revived again, deliberately and hopefully. That is not the fact, as the friends of the game know well. Yet, one of the oldest traditions of lacrosse seems to be that it "is coming back." I can remember no time in my experience of the game, which extends back for more than a quarter of a century, when men were not getting to their feet and saying solemnly that they were glad to see how the grand old pastime was coming back. I suppose that the same old speech was being made every year from 1867 onward, and if lacrosse had been the national game before that time, they would have started to make the speech still earlier.

It has always puzzled me why there should be so much criticism of the present lacrosse, with the past used as a background for comparison. No other game is subjected to that sort of constant nagging. Look how the Americans keep up their huzzas for baseball—every year, no matter what happens, is the greatest that has been. Can it be that lacrosse suffers because, from its very beginning as a civilized sport, it has possessed traditions? Traditions make people talk in the past tense, and people who talk in the past tense always see to it that the present tense suffers by comparison.

Canada is the only nation with a game of its own that belongs to the soil, that was created by the aborigines, and that was adopted and civilized by the white powers that came into possession of the land by right of sword. Of course, it should be unnecessary to mention that the lacrosse played by the Indians was very different from the modern version with which we are familiar. The redmen's conception of sport was not something at which the majority of men looked on. All the able bodied braves were expected to participate, and the field was proportionately long. We have adapted the game so completely that even the names used by the Indian to describe it have disappeared. To the French pioneers, the implement used by the players suggested the title, lacrosse, which is

To the question which heads this article on Canada's national game Mr. Jacob answers an emphatic "Yes—even better than it used to be." In his opinion the real handicap of lacrosse is the tradition-monger.

used to-day. The rules that were good enough for our copper-skinned fellow citizens have gone, but the habit of tradition remains. I have always had a feeling that some day an ex-player, with a literary turn of mind, will write an interesting book about the pre-white period of lacrosse, ending with the capture of Fort Michillimackinac.

There are a great many Canadians who take a pride in lacrosse because it came to us in such an unusual way. They like to feel that it is distinctively Canadian, even more so than its twin-brother, hockey. These native sports are usually described as twins because they have so many similar qualities. The men who play both of them have to possess speed, good condition, initiative, self-reliance, and, more than in any other sport, that essential of character, self-control. But while we, who have made lacrosse a hobby, like to know that it possesses

followed by slump periods when things were not so prosperous. Occasionally, an interval of success will be followed by the creation of an entirely new set of problems.

It was because senior lacrosse enjoyed too much success about a quarter of a century ago that professional lacrosse came into existence. Now, if ever there was a game that has to remain amateur, it is lacrosse. The essence of professionalism is money-making. It requires a game that can be played frequently without exhausting the stamina of the performers. Baseball makes an ideal professional game because a man can play it day in and day out for months, and be none the worse for wear. In as strenuous a pastime as lacrosse, played when the weather is at its hottest, the average of one game per week is about all you can expect from a team, no matter how perfectly conditioned it may be. In the long run,

professional lacrosse could never be made to pay because the gate receipts from weekly games are not sufficient for carrying expenses. After experimenting for about fifteen years with professional lacrosse, the magnates concerned laid it upon the shelf and left the field once more to the amateurs.

During the years of professional lacrosse, many persons looked back to the early amateur days as the golden age. After the passing of the professionals, other persons looked back to that interval and talked as though the senior amateurs, blossoming forth with new vigor, were in the middle of the process of coming back. As a matter of fact, there was some excellent amateur lacrosse played in the days of the professionals, even though the men who played for the love of the game had to accept less limelight than their brothers with sporting bank accounts. In 1913 and 1914, the amateur team that played for the town of Brampton was every



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so much tradition, we feel that tradition becomes a little too much of a good thing when a habit grows up of talking as though all the best days of lacrosse were old days.

Legacies of Professionalism

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bit as brilliant as any of the professionals then on view. In 1914, the amateur lineup that played for Vancouver was considered by many experts the best team in Canada.

When the professionals closed up shop, the amateurs did not come back, they merely came into their own.

The plunge into professionalism had several peculiar effects upon the conditions existing in lacrosse. In the first place, the Minto Cup, donated by Lord Minto to be the symbol of the lacrosse championship of Canada, has passed into a strange limbo. Naturally, the best teams in the Dominion were the ones that first turned professional, and they carried the Minto Cup with them, out of the amateur field in which it had been originally intended to function. Its fate was the same as that of the Stanley Cup in hockey, with the difference that professional hockey still carries on. As there is no longer any extensively organized professional lacrosse in Canada, and as it is not likely that there ever will be again, the Minto Cup has ceased to mean anything. Its grave is British Columbia, where it was successfully defended for many seasons after New Westminster won the cup from the Shamrocks of Montreal, and its soul has gone to the place where the proud and once embattled sporting trophies spend their eternity of uselessness.

Later, the Mann Cup was donated to take the place of the Minto Cup as the amateur trophy. It also rests peacefully in British Columbia, largely because of the unevenness of the game played in the different provinces. You cannot hope for interesting interprovincial struggles for the lacrosse championship until the chances are as even as they are in hockey. The last time that teams from the various provinces met in a Dominion tournament was in Winnipeg in September, 1919. St. Simon's of Toronto and the Vancouver team out-classed the other entries, the latter aggregation winning out, but the contests were not sufficiently close to be exciting.

Encouraging the Youngsters

LOOK over the lacrosse field as we find it to-day in Canada. In the Maritime Provinces, the game has never secured a foothold. Quebec was once the great centre of the game, but the teams in recent years have not been what they once were, although last season saw a great many activities that promise well for the future. There has never been better lacrosse played anywhere than can be seen in Ontario at the present time. In Manitoba, they have at no time brought the quality of the game played to the highest state of perfection, probably because most of the teams have been located in and around Winnipeg, so that there has never been sufficient competition. Regarding British Columbia, it is difficult to generalize. The game has not been as extensively organized there as in Ontario, for example, and yet they have always played a sterling brand of lacrosse. Whenever a team has been needed to defend the Mann Cup, a line-up of players has been trotted out by a leading Pacific Coast club, capable of disposing of the best of challengers.

The most important lacrosse development of the current year is one that should, in course of time, help to equalize the standard of play in the various centres. The Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association, the parent body made up of representatives of the various provincial associations, has inaugurated a movement to encourage lacrosse among the boys in the schools of the Dominion. They are promoting the formation of city and country leagues, like those that already exist in Toronto and St. Catharines and in Peel County.

No Death—No Resurrection

IT IS rather unfortunate that some of the old guard seem to have the impression that this movement to enable the younger boys to learn lacrosse is a revival of the game. If they would look over the entire field, they would undoubtedly discover that it is a little premature to commence talking of resurrection before there are even signs of approaching death. Take Ontario, for example. In the

years before the war, there was a great deal more vitality in the amateurs round Toronto than in the professionals. Since 1918, the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association has enjoyed vigor and prosperity, with well over a hundred teams playing every season. If a few indications of staleness showed themselves in 1924 and 1925, they were due to too much senior success. After three or four summers in which the seniors had been very much in the lime-light, the association showed signs of falling to a marked degree under the control of the senior teams. The Ontario problem of the moment is to broaden the interest again, so that the minor series the intermediates, the juniors and the juveniles will have just as much consideration as they should receive.

During half a century, lacrosse has gone through a series of improvements, until it is now universally admired by sporting authorities.

Still, during all the years of its existence, the younger lacrosse players have been obliged to listen to the old boys singing their never-ending chorus about the days when the game was a greater game than it has become, and when the men who played it were giants with the prowess of giants.

Lacrosse Has Its Rivals

PERHAPS a few contrasts between tradition and reality will indicate why this harking-back grows so aggravating to those who are closely associated with the game at the present time. The old boys like to talk as though lacrosse ought to be able to push all other summer sports off the Canadian map, if it were played as they used to play it fifty years ago. They say: "Look how our other two national pastimes, hockey and rugby, monopolize their special seasons." They do not stop to think that in the fall and winter, there is not much sporting opposition, but lacrosse is played at a time when more than a dozen strongly organized sports, from the wealthy American baseball to the husky English soccer, are on the green, each with its own followers. Think of the money that is spent to advertise baseball; think of the increased interest taken year after year in golf; look over a sporting page published in 1900 and one published in 1926 and see how many new sorts of champions have been created in the interval. With the increased number of games, the space occupied by each on the horizon during the months of June, July and August is proportionately smaller. Lacrosse is all the more alive because it has to fight for its place in the Sun—or in any other newspaper that runs a sporting page.

I have heard the old tradition-mongers maintain that lacrosse was a better game in the days when the rules gave the victory to the team that first scored four goals—in some cases it was three goals. Anyone who is familiar with sport will admit that the assertion does not look at all convincing. That method of declaring a winner could only be better where one team out-classed the other; then the agony would be shortened, and the fans would not sit for eighty minutes to watch the rolling up of a score of twenty to two. However, on the other hand, there have been more than a few games in recent years in which one team got away to a flying start and tallied four goals in the first quarter, only to be worn down in the long run and out-scored in the end. Among the finest encounters that I have ever witnessed, several games of that type would be included. Of course, you want to find the better team in any game, and the better team is the one that can make the biggest score in a given period, not the one that can score fastest in the first ten minutes.

On one occasion, a very important and swagger game was being played between the Torontos and the Shamrocks of Montreal. It was in the days before the fashionable folk spent their Saturdays at golf clubs or attended week-end parties. The smart people, as well as the sporting fraternity, made their way to the old Toronto lacrosse grounds. For an hour, they were gathering and getting placed in readiness for an exciting afternoon. The teams were known to be very evenly matched, and were expected to stage a

