

Snappy work at the once popular Scarboro Beach field, Toronto. A St. Simon's player bulges the nets with a hot shot.

Can Lacrosse Come Back?

A frank answer to the query, "What killed lacrosse?"
and an estimate of its chances of revival

By H. H. ROXBOROUGH

are hard-boiled humans who drop one game and accept another without a tinge of regret, then just tell an Englishman that soccer is only a childish recreation and that cricket is a social diversion and not a he-man's pastime. Inevitably, such an attack would evoke a more spirited defense than if the criticism had been levelled at a political party or a religious denomination. Or, quietly whisper to a United States schoolboy that the crack of bat and ball will not be heard again throughout the land; then pass along the sad news that Yale, Harvard, Michigan, Notre Dame and other knowledge foundries intended substituting inter-university debating contests for those blood-stirring gridiron battles, and at once the sportsmen of the Republic would organize to prevent the destruction of those games that have become national institutions.

Canadians, on the other hand, seem to be different. Apart from the energy displayed by a few "dyed-in-the-wool" leaders, there appears to be comparatively little enthusiasm for what is generally known as our National game. Yet, lacrosse has more claim to perpetuation in this Dominion than have soccer or cricket in the British Isles, or football and baseball in the United States. The game was played by the Indians long before the first white man set foot on our shores, and is so deeply rooted in Canadian soil that it is actually recorded in our history books. Its anniversaries now correspond with those of the land that gave it birth, for the Canadian Lacrosse Association came into being in Confederation year.

On the Skids

THE game of lacrosse thus grew up with the country, and for forty years after confederation its popularity steadily increased. Twenty summers ago, every corner lot was the stamping ground of the lacrosse-wielding Canadian lad; the names of such outstanding players as "Charlie" Querrie, "Newsy" Lalonde and "Dad" Turnbull were respected in every schoolyard; citizens of social and political prominence were keen to hold executive offices, while the sporting public fought its way to crowded stands and supported its favorites with a financial and physical fervor that approached fanaticism.

At that particular period in lacrosse history, it was not uncommon for the team in the little factory town of Cornwall to draw three thousand fans; at a game between Nationals of Montreal and Tecumsehs of Toronto, over

twelve thousand enthusiasts crossed Toronto Bay to view the battle of the year, and out in New Westminster when an Eastern club attempted to regain the coveted Minto Cup, the fans lined-up five hours ahead of game time, all business in the British Columbia town was suspended, and the turnstiles clicked over thirteen thousand times.

In that golden age of Canadian lacrosse, the sport had every requisite to success—public approval, social prestige, financial prosperity, the support of national pride, and international recognition. But during the past twenty years, something awful has happened. Professional lacrosse, once flourishing in Montreal, Ottawa, Cornwall, Quebec, Toronto, New Westminster and Vancouver, has been submerged for ten years and shows not the slightest indication of returning to the surface. In the past twenty-five years, the number of registered lacrosse players in Ontario has decreased from fifteen hundred to less than one-third of that total. In Toronto, from a population approaching seven hundred thousand, only two senior teams are organized, and one of them is a university team that plays only in the springtime and draws its student members from teams throughout the province. Ottawa has only one team; Cornwall, one senior; while Hamilton and London have not a single entry in the major series.

A friend of mine, formerly a prominent player, recalls that twenty years ago players were so enthusiastic that sunrise practices were not uncommon, and he remembers enumerating a turnout of the Junction Shamrock Lacrosse Club, and the total at one practice, all playing on one large field, was six different teams and one hundred and ten players.

Today, in the entire province of Ontario, the senior lacrosse division has only five teams playing the game. And the depreciation is not only in numbers, for it is too readily recalled that in the Olympic lacrosse exhibition at Amsterdam last year the United States team defeated the Canadians, and our clubs who visit the colleges in the States are now meeting with very ordinary success.

What killed lacrosse in Canada? Before attempting to answer that pertinent question, let us assure ourselves that lacrosse was not a suicidal victim—it did not destroy itself; for strangely, while the game has refused to thrive on its native soil, it has been growing with amazing rapidity in the fields of Australia, England and the United States.

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BACK in the first decade of the present century, the game of lacrosse was so deeply enshrined in the heart of sporting Canada that its permanency and supremacy seemed absolutely assured. Today, after the passing of only one generation, that sport, instead of occupying a position of country-wide prominence and respect, is actually struggling gamely to prevent a continued decline that can only result in the speedy extinction of this once overwhelmingly popular pastime.

It's not for me to say whether or not this decline will continue, but suppose lacrosse were completely abandoned by the Canadian youth, would its passing really mean anything to Canada? Is there such a thing as national sentiment for a game?

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with snow and exposed to the blizzard. It was brutal work crawling out naked and searching under the debris for clothes. We have built a new igloo, but I'm afraid it won't last long, as it is made of sugar snow. Shevek is worrying about the dogs. He says they will never last to the coast unless we can get food. We have only one fill left for the stove—no provisions, only a little flour.

"February 23. Still stormbound. The wind is thrashing against the igloo and there seems no prospect of a let-up. We are down to three small pancakes apiece. Lack of food makes the cold seem ten times as bad. We have been in our sleeping bags all day trying to keep warm.

"February 24. There seems to be no prospect of the wind dropping. It is worse than ever today. We managed to find enough coal oil to cook three bannocks. Tomorrow it will be flour and water and not much of that.

"February 25. Still stormbound, but the wind doesn't seem so bad. We have decided to try for the coast tomorrow, no matter how thick it is. Nuterallah (Peters' native) will not be responsible for guiding us in the drift, but we should be able to get our approximate direction from the wind. Shevek said he saw the sun for a few seconds this afternoon.

"According to Peters there is a case of condensed milk cached about twenty miles farther on. Right now I can think of nothing more wonderful than a tin of condensed milk to suck. We have been

torturing ourselves by talking about it all afternoon.

"Three of the dogs look as if they are about to give up the ghost. They can hardly stand up.

"February 26. It was still drifting when we started out this morning, but we managed to reach the condensed milk..."

Even more fortunately we found a cache of dog food and on the following day we reached the Hudson's Bay Company post at Cape Eskimo.

After resting there for a day we set out on the last two-hundred-mile stage of our journey to Churchill, well provided with dog food, provisions and coal oil. In order to avoid the rocky coastline we travelled for the greater part of the way on the sea ice which extends for about twenty miles from the shore. In many places the ice had been piled into huge hummocks and progress was slow. Even so, we succeeded in making the journey in six sleeps—thus establishing a record.

At end of steel—it was then about ten miles from Churchill—we bade good-by to our friends who for six weary weeks would face the north wind back to Baker Lake.

"Good-by," said Shevekatah, "I will look for you when the geese fly north. In the between-time may you prosper."

And a week later the Skipper and I parted. "Au revoir, Admiral," said he, and as the train gathered speed he shouted: "Don't—forget—breakfast—4.30."

Can Lacrosse Come Back?

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In Australia, the city of Melbourne alone has forty intermediate teams and every state in the Commonwealth has an association. Indeed, so enthusiastic are the Australians that the honorary secretary of the Victorian Lacrosse Association hopes to have a Canadian team visit the sister-nation during 1930.

While the growth of lacrosse in the antipodes has been abundant, it has not been nearly so luxuriant as in England. Even three years ago the English Lacrosse Union had in its affiliation one hundred and fifty boys' teams and twenty university teams, and that is not all. The women of England have shown an almost unparalleled enthusiasm for lacrosse, and the latest enrolment of the All England Ladies Lacrosse Association indicates a membership of ninety-eight school teams and fifty-seven other clubs. It need, therefore, occasion no surprise to learn that, according to P. J. Lally, four times as many lacrosse sticks are being sold in the British Isles as in Canada.

It is thus quite evident that Australia and England have taken a decidedly keen interest in Canada's national game, but the most enthusiastic reception to lacrosse has been bestowed by the United States. If Canada has rejected its offspring, the sportsmen of the United States have generously afforded it board and lodging and a chance to grow. W. J. Hanley, formerly a prominent Canadian player and a leading executive, has emphasized the adoption of lacrosse by the "Statesmen" in these words: "At West Point, lacrosse is played by over four hundred cadets of the great army training school, and at Annapolis it is rounding out about five hundred youths specially selected for the United States navy. In California there is a popular girls' league, several teams playing first-class lacrosse."

Early in the summer of 1928, the United States played its semi-final Olympic trial game at Washington, and ten thousand spectators, nearly one-quarter of whom had travelled forty miles by special train, attended the spectacular contest. Shortly afterward, the final game between Johns Hopkins University and University of Maryland was played at Baltimore, and twelve

thousand lacrosse admirers watched the Hopkins' representatives snatch out a victory. And that same team, by the way, defeated the Canadian team at Amsterdam and made it necessary for the English twelve to save the Empire's prestige. The athletic coaches of all United States universities have recognized the great merits of lacrosse and are according it a position second only to football in the college sporting world.

So, realizing the eagerness with which the youths of other lands are adopting lacrosse, it is only reasonable to assume that the decline in Canada cannot be attributed to a weakness in the game itself.

What Killed the Game in Canada?

WHY, then, has lacrosse gone back? Recently I left that question with half a dozen men who should know the answer, and each of them contributed a different reason. The Great War, professionalism, executive errors, roughness, expense, and desire for easier sports were charged with the responsibility for the decadence of lacrosse, and possibly each has contributed to the slump.

Unquestionably in war years every lacrosse team sent some husky lads to the bigger game in France; many clubs were so riddled by departures that they could not field a team. In Ontario, in 1917 and 1918, the intermediate series, usually the most active, suspended competition entirely. With the players away and clubs disbanded, the public interest waned. Then when many of the soldier athletes returned, it was revealed that their long absence had weakened their desire to continue playing, and while they were retiring from the sport, the juniors were not coming up in sufficient numbers to replace them. Thus the Great War contributed to the decline.

Professionalism, too, is charged with sharing in the killing of this good game. In those years of plenty when Nationals, Shamrocks, Montreals, Tecumsehs, Torontos, Cornwall, Capitals, Vancouver and New Westminster were attracting immense crowds, the salaries were sufficient to induce hundreds of good amateurs

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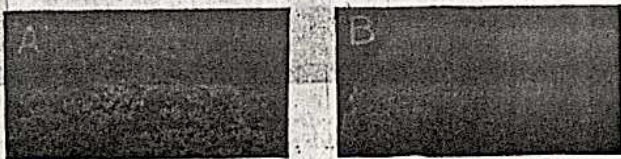
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MACLEAN'S MAGAZINE

153 University Avenue

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to forsake the corner lots and public parks and play on enclosed grounds where financial rewards were considerable. While professionalism prospered, the game did not suffer, but, as frequently happens, when "pro" clubs lost money; they disbanded, and when they ceased operations the players in the prime of their careers were compelled to hang up their sticks. Thus professionalism injured amateur lacrosse through taking away its best players, and then weakened lacrosse, in general, by disbanded the professional clubs and leaving the players "high and dry" where they could not return to amateurism and where professionalism would not use them.

Rowdysm and Roughness

NOT only did the Great War and professionalism tend to weaken the influence of lacrosse, but so did rowdysm by spectators and roughness of players. This particular allegation of the two r's—rowdysm and roughness—rather irritates some lacrosse leaders who are positive that lacrosse is not so "tough" as hockey or rugby. A prominent centre-player in the National Hockey League who has participated in both Canada's winter and summer national sports has asserted that hockey is rougher. Nevertheless, there is evidence to warrant the suggestion that dirty tactics have worked against the sport. In professional days, it was not unusual to read on Canadian sport pages such headlines as, these: "Player at Cornwall arrested for rowdysm; official seizes stick and swings at player; weekly row in National Lacrosse Union; National player assaults one-armed official; mounted police assist in quelling lacrosse riot in Toronto; Vancouver police sergeant draws revolver to save referee from injury; Vancouver players' car riddled by rocks; Canadians and Nationals indulge in wildest kind of slugging; players carried off unconscious and others run up in stand and assault spectators." Undoubtedly such conditions did much to alienate public support and were prominent factors in necessitating the burial of professional lacrosse.

True, the ardor of players and fans has somewhat cooled in recent years, but there is still too much "rough stuff." Even in the Olympic Trials of 1927, it was charged that the semi-final game between Weston and Winnipeg teams was reminiscent of the old days, that three Weston players were unfit to play in the final game, and that the others were badly crippled. Roughness in any game is damaging in two ways: it removes the support of many sport lovers who prefer clean play, and it discourages many prospective players who decline to absorb the unnecessary punishment. It may be more than a coincidence that in other countries where the game is progressing so rapidly, the players wear few, if any, pads; penalties are scarce, and casualties rare.

Responsibility for the decline in Canada's national game does not rest entirely upon players and fans, however, for executives too have been charged with contributing to the delinquency. It almost seems unfair to comment unfavorably on the work of leaders who have struggled against odds to bring back the game, and yet criticism has been directed against them by some of the hard workers themselves. One lacrosse authority, whose experience is unquestioned, has expressed himself in this way: "Lacrosse executives have been so anxious to please everybody that they have done the game an injury. Lacrosse teams are notorious for delay in starting games and many do not begin until long after the advertised hour; most lacrosse associations have residence rules but observance is easily evaded; senior clubs particularly have been frequently charged with paying players, and association leaders make little attempt to investigate and allay the prevalent suspicions." Executive laxity and indiscretion may

thus have some share in the inability of lacrosse to attain its former status. Still, while many other factors have contributed, the opinion persists that the commonest obstacle is an increasing desire to play easier sports! Unquestionably, there is a tendency for the young fellow to prefer softball because it demands less practice, ordinary physical condition, and can be played in the evenings and thus leave Saturday free. Included in Canada's host of "softballers" are hundreds of young men who might have played lacrosse. Golf, too, has exacted its toll, and the motor car all too speedily transports the prospective player from the lacrosse field to the summer resort.

Included in the desire for easier sports is not only the physical element but also the financial problem. The softball team supplies a bat and ball; the lacrosse club requires individual stocks, jerseys, trunks, shoes, caps, and goal nets, while the area required for lacrosse is sufficient to accommodate four softball diamonds.

Thus, war, professionalism, roughness, executive leniency, softer sports and motor cars have persistently tugged against the sincere efforts of those who have struggled hard to revive the game.

Is a Revival Possible?

UNTIL quite recently, the efforts of these "revivalists" have secured few converts, but at last a definite well-organized movement to bring back the former greatness appears to be under way and it is starting not at the top with the players who will retire in a couple of seasons, but with the schoolboys and young lads who have years of play ahead.

Last year, the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association in co-operation with the Ontario Athletic Commission induced Fred Waghorne, Senior, one of the best-known and popular lacrosse leaders in the land, to go through Ontario and preach lacrosse. Mr. Waghorne went on his pilgrimage and he talked about Canada's national game to school teachers, service clubs, boys organizations, and to old-timers who had forsaken the sport. But "Wag" not only talked, for he also organized—and the campaign results are startling. Mr. Waghorne formed forty-five new teams and in some cities he not only sponsored clubs, but formed leagues. Thus, in one season alone, through this Lacrosse Boosters Organization, six hundred young recruits enlisted in the lacrosse army. Not only the rural lads but the city boys, too, are swinging into the parade, for the number of public school teams in Toronto tripled during 1928, and Runnymede School alone has ordered twelve dozen sticks. And financial support for the movement is easily available, as the Boosters Fund already has five hundred dollars surplus; one anonymous enthusiast has offered one thousand dollars; "Joe" Lally made another contribution and offered sticks at a very low cost, while the Ontario Athletic Commission is assisting financially and is also providing medals and trophies.

And while "the fiery lacrosse" has been carried most prominently in Ontario, there is also a mustering of the enthusiasts in other provinces. During 1929, increasing attention has been given to the players of tomorrow, and from "the ground up" a new lacrosse structure is being erected.

And well it may, for if the present leaders will eliminate undue roughness, start games on time, stamp out professional tendencies, and encourage native talent rather than imported stars, then no game known to man has more to offer to players and spectators alike. Lacrosse, properly played, will develop the strength, speed and skill of the contestant, and will provide interesting competition, fresh air and sunshine for the fans and for Canada. Lacrosse will become an instrument of international goodwill wherever our national game is played. Lacrosse deserves to come back, and every Canadian sportsman wishes it good luck.