

“Splendid But Undesirable Isolation”: Recasting Canada’s National Game as Box Lacrosse, 1931–1932

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Canadian nationalists and social reformers celebrated the sport of lacrosse as their country’s “national game” during the late nineteenth century. Working-class spectators, gamblers, and athletes who accepted pay for play, however, did not always embrace the middle-class cultural agenda of the national game. In the years preceding World War I, professional lacrosse clubs engaged in bidding wars for star players despite the fact that club revenue rarely justified high salaries. Brawls involving players and spectators, as well as administrative disputes among pro clubs, gave lacrosse a negative public image.¹ After the war, lacrosse never regained the prominent position in Canadian sport life that it had once occupied. Baseball and softball became the summer sports of choice for many Canadians. Commercial sport promoters, however, launched a new indoor version of the old national game, which they called “box lacrosse,” against the backdrop of the early years of the Great Depression.

The entrepreneurs who introduced box lacrosse to Canada in 1931 owned National Hockey League franchises.² Their new game was a modified form of the field game played by fewer men on an artificial surface laid out over the floors of hockey arenas. Although the lacrosse sticks were nearly identical to those used outdoors, much of the rest of the sport was borrowed from hockey. Indeed, the target audience of box lacrosse was idle hockey fans. This occasion, however, was not the first time modified forms of the outdoor game had been attempted in either the United States or Canada. During the previous half century, field lacrosse clubs had staged similar exhibitions at the fair grounds of Cornwall, Ontario, and in the old Madison Square Garden in New York City, among other places.³ An examination of the origins of this new sport illustrates the authority of commercial promoters in shaping culture, the various belief systems people attach to sport, and the unintended consequences of newly invented sporting traditions. Even though professional box lacrosse ultimately failed as a commercial spectacle, the new game dramatically affected Canada’s amateur lacrosse community and its relationship with its counterpart in the U.S.

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Beginning in early 1931, newspapers in Montreal and Toronto introduced readers to “box lacrosse.” According to these stories, retired Toronto Tecumseh player Jack Macdonald took a trip to Australia and noticed athletes in Sydney and Melbourne playing lacrosse at night under floodlights with only seven players on a side instead of the traditional twelve. Even though Australians had been playing field lacrosse for decades, the Canadian newspapers reported, the impetus for “night lacrosse” actually came from John R. Thornby, an electrical engineer from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania who was contracted to work for the government of New South Wales.⁴ When Macdonald returned home, he allegedly told NHL owner Joe Cattarinich about the game. Cattarinich and Leo Dandurand were the principal owners of the Montreal Canadiens franchise. A former lacrosse player with the old Montreal Nationales, Cattarinich also owned several horse racetracks and was often the silent man behind the Canadiens. Dandurand usually represented the club at NHL meetings. Given the widespread popularity of ice hockey throughout Quebec and Ontario, Cattarinich and Dandurand hoped that the gamble on a new indoor version of what Canadians once touted in strong patriotic terms, even at a time of great economic turmoil, would pay off.

Plans for a league began to crystallize in early February 1931 when Cattarinich and Dandurand met in New York City with promoters from other cities, including New York Yankees owner Jacob Ruppert. Inspired by Macdonald’s stories of night lacrosse played in front of large crowds, their earliest plan called for two franchises in New York and one each in Brooklyn, Boston, Baltimore, Toronto, and Montreal. Each club would play in baseball parks under floodlights.⁵ By late April, the new International Professional Lacrosse League allotted not one, but two franchises to Montreal. Cattarinich and Dandurand owned one of the clubs and named it the Canadiens to attract their NHL team’s fans. The other team called itself the Montreal Shamrocks, paying homage to an old local Irish club. Both franchises made tentative arrangements to use Montreal Stadium, home of baseball’s class AA International League Royals, and hired well-known lacrosse veterans as coaches: Edward “Newsy” Lalonde for the Canadiens and P.J. “Paddy” Brennan for the Shamrocks.⁶

In addition to Cattarinich and Dandurand, the actual driving force behind the league was the same man who had allegedly first discovered box lacrosse in Australia and was now the new league’s acting president: James A. Macdonald. Besides being a former lacrosse player, he was also a veteran journalist in Toronto who now apparently served as the front man for a company that manufactured floodlight equipment for outdoor sports facilities. Not surprisingly, he stood to profit personally from any baseball stadium hosting night lacrosse.⁷ Meanwhile, league management eventually settled on a six-team, four-city alignment: the two Montreal clubs, the New York Yankees, New York Giants, Boston Plymouths, and Toronto Maple Leafs.⁸

Nailing down an owner for Toronto was no easy task. The lead candidate was Charles Querrie, a local investor with the Arena Gardens and a columnist with the *Toronto Daily Star*. A former lacrosse player with the old Toronto Tecumseh, Querrie once owned and coached the Toronto St. Patricks hockey team before it was renamed the Maple Leafs. The prohibitive cost of installing lights at baseball’s Maple Leaf Stadium, however, made Querrie uneasy about the new sport. According to *Toronto Daily Star* columnist Len Smith, it was Macdonald and not Querrie who

pushed for the team: "It is the manufacturers of this equipment who are keen to line up those formerly connected with professional lacrosse, rather than the initiative being taken by these well-known sportsmen."⁹ Uncomfortable with Macdonald's sales pitch, Querrie threatened to pull out of his initial commitment unless the league allowed him to stage games indoors in the home of the NHL Maple Leafs. Eventually, the league decided that it was better to get a Querrie-run team playing indoors than to have no Toronto franchise at all.¹⁰

While Querrie held out against playing outdoors in favor of using the Arena Gardens, the league president succeeded in getting the New York Yankees lacrosse club to sign a contract to install lights in its stadium in early May. Most prominent among the investors were Edward G. Barrow, the business manager who had turned the baseball Yankees into a dynasty during the 1920s, and Ernest Savard, owner of the Montreal Royals.¹¹ The decision to install lights at Yankee Stadium was certainly bold considering that major-league owners regarded night baseball as a minor-league gimmick.¹² By the end of April, the new lacrosse league made preliminary arrangements to install lights in three other baseball parks: Montreal Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and Maple Leaf Stadium, assuming the league could get Querrie to change his mind. Each team would field a goaltender, two defense men, a rover, a center man, and two attack men inside a four-sided "box" measuring 220 by 100 feet. The short sides and one of the long sides would feature walls four-feet-five inches high. The fourth side would be twelve-and-a-half feet tall and covered with a thin chemical layer to allow the wall to refract light. Opposite this wall on the roof of a grandstand would reside 22 projection units shining 72,000 watts of light onto the field. Promoters claimed the light would be brighter and clearer than what indoor lighting systems offered.¹³

To attract ticket-paying hockey fans to box lacrosse games, the league sold itself as summertime ice hockey. The rules committee made sure that box lacrosse looked and felt like ice hockey by dividing games into three 20-minute periods and by using hockey goal nets and NHL referees.¹⁴ High unemployment rates among the working class contributed to the league's decision to start games late enough (8–8:45 p.m.) to permit men with day jobs to catch a game. Despite all the similarities between hockey and the new sport, however, hockey remained a game played mainly on the ice surface, whereas the most important play in lacrosse took place in the air. The potential for a lacrosse player to strike another with his stick in the arms, torso, or the head was much greater than what might happen in a hockey game.

Once plans to finance and structure the sport materialized, coaches turned their attention to stocking their rosters. Supporters of amateur sport warned younger players against signing professional contracts. On May 9, the sports editor of the *Cornwall Freeholder* issued a stern warning: "it is probable that any player who steps up to the pro lacrosse ranks may just as well kiss his amateur card goodbye forever."¹⁵ Clubs also targeted the Indians from the Caughnawaga, St. Regis, and Six Nations reserves. Coaches certainly respected the talent of some Native athletes, but management recognized the commercial appeal of having a Native or two on the team. Older lacrosse fans and veteran journalists recalled the big crowds that visiting Native teams used to draw in Toronto and Montreal decades earlier.¹⁶ With summer at hand, the new lacrosse league also hoped other players might come from the ranks of pro hockey. Fears of injury, however, precluded most NHL players from accepting whatever pay the upstart league offered.¹⁷

Promoters wanted the inaugural season to begin in late June, but ownership and even the number of franchises remained unclear through early May. With the Shamrocks apparently disorganized, another ownership group emerged in Montreal from within the NHL Maroons. Following the lead of the Montreal Canadiens, this new Montreal franchise used the hockey nickname "Maroons." The club's hierarchy included names familiar to hockey fans, including former manager Dunc Munro, and Gordon Cushing and Thomas Arnold, who were the directors of the Canadian Arena Company, which also owned the Montreal Forum. With the demise of the Shamrocks, Paddy Brennan joined the new team as the manager.¹⁸ The Maroons also secured the playing services of their own hockey star, Lionel Conacher, which gave the league instant credibility.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Querrie bowed out of his initial commitment to the league. Instead, Peter G. Campbell, a former University of Toronto athlete now linked closely to the NHL Maple Leafs, stepped in as a late replacement to run the Maple Leafs lacrosse team. To administer the team, Campbell hired veteran hockey coach Eddie Powers, who was managing a Canadian all-star lacrosse team scheduled to play an exhibition in Baltimore against St. John's College of Annapolis.²⁰

By the time owners met in Montreal on May 24 to discuss the upcoming season, the league included only four franchises, owned and administered by sportsmen from Montreal and Toronto.²¹ The main exception to the big-city cartel was Joe Lally of Cornwall. Lally closely monitored the activities of the league, mainly because he owned the primary lacrosse stick factory in North America. Lally was also a former mayor of Cornwall, had remained involved with the leadership of the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association, and worked tirelessly to promote lacrosse by giving away free lacrosse sticks to children. Lally surely hoped the new professional box lacrosse venture would boost stick sales. The owners agreed that the Maple Leafs would play indoors in the Arena Gardens and both the Canadiens and the Maroons would play in the Montreal Forum. Only the Yankees would play outdoors. This decision coincided with the departure of Macdonald as acting president. The league replaced him with Adolph L. Caron, a Montreal financier and former head of the old Montreal Nationales lacrosse club.²² With the move indoors, the league also had to create a more lacrosse-friendly playing surface. At the Montreal Forum, management installed an artificial turf that designers believed would be soft enough to lessen the impact of running on the Forum's floor.²³

Owners experienced yet another letdown when the Yankees' failure to install lights meant there would be no lacrosse in New York City. Instead of playing as a three-team loop, the league recruited Joe Lally and Dr. William C. Burns to assume control of and operate a franchise in Cornwall. The decision was remarkable considering that Montreal and Toronto were about 74 and 57 times larger than Cornwall, respectively.²⁴ Civic leaders in Cornwall felt a pro franchise, even one awarded on short notice, would give their city much needed publicity. Lally's decision to field a team might likely have been inspired by his recent trip to Baltimore where he watched St. John's College defeat the Canadian all-stars to capture the international championship trophy he had donated. The first game attracted about 5,000 people during the day, but the second and deciding game was played at night before 7,500 fans. "Night lacrosse is certainly the coming thing," Lally told the *Cornwall Freeholder*. "I have no doubt but that it is going over in a way that will startle sport fans."²⁵

The reinvented national game of Canada finally arrived on the evening of June 23 in the Montreal Forum. Over 5,000 fans saw the Maroons rally to defeat the Canadiens. According to the Montreal *Gazette*, “The first period was not long under way before all circumstances surrounding the game, save the weather, were distinctly reminiscent of a winter night in the Forum at the height of the National Hockey League season.”²⁶ A smaller crowd of somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 people saw the June 29 home opener of the Toronto Maple Leafs against the Maroons. The most noteworthy feature of the game was that two amateur players, Bert Large and Jerry Kendall, refused to sign contracts with the Maple Leafs until just before the start of the third period. Delaying their first home game until July 14, the Cornwall Colts needed more time to install lights at the Cornwall Athletic Grounds. Despite the much smaller population base to draw from, the Colts attracted between 2,500 and 3,000 spectators to watch the hometown team lose to the Canadiens.²⁷

The home openers in each city likely gave promoters a sense of cautious optimism, but the crowds were smaller than what NHL teams attracted. Unfortunately for the league, attendance eroded during the hotter months of the summer. The average number of spectators per game declined from 3,600 in June to almost 3,000 in July to nearly 2,900 in August, before rising to almost 3,200 in September. Toronto attracted an average of nearly 4,400 spectators per game to the Arena Gardens, whereas the two Montreal franchises averaged about 3,200 fans in the Forum. Despite the tiny size of Cornwall, the Colts managed to draw an average crowd of over 1,300 people. In Montreal, the intracity hockey rivalry certainly affected lacrosse attendance. Box lacrosse games pitting the Maroons against the Canadiens drew almost 4,800 fans per game, outpacing what either club attracted when playing out-of-towners.²⁸ Fans in Montreal and Toronto who were unable or unwilling to pay for tickets followed the teams by listening to game highlights on local radio stations and by reading stories in several competing newspapers.²⁹

Amateur clubs in the Quebec–Ontario Senior Lacrosse League and the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association supplied most of the new professional league’s players. Whereas much of the Canadiens’ roster came from local francophone teams, the Maroons club included mostly English-speaking lacrosse players and several men from the parent NHL team. Six different hockey players suited up for the Maroons, including veteran Hooley Smith, who quit after playing in only a few games. When the Toronto Maple Leafs raided amateur clubs for players, they especially targeted the Mann Cup champion Brampton Excelsiors. The Leafs signed six Brampton players, including three men who eventually were among the new pro league’s top seven scorers. The Leafs also tried to sign Lionel Conacher’s brother Charlie, who also played for the NHL Maple Leafs, but fearing injuries, Conn Smythe refused to let any of his men play box lacrosse. As for the Cornwall Colts, the team’s multiethnic roster included many Irish-, French- and Anglo-Canadians, several Mohawks from St. Regis, and three brothers who were black.³⁰ One of the Natives, John White, was rumored to be anywhere from fifty-one to sixty-one years old. Early losses led management to look for younger men, including three American college players.

Unlike the Montreal and Toronto teams that could draw fans from large urban populations, the Cornwall Colts relied heavily on spectators from the surrounding countryside and nearby towns.³¹ Despite the poor economy, civic leaders cast ticket

purchases as a civic responsibility. “Cornwallites work to death the old gag that ‘money is tight,’” the local press implored. “Maybe it is, but surely the real fans can make a few sacrifices in the interests, not only of sport, but of their community.”³² The Colts attracted spectators from outside Cornwall by stocking the roster with a few rural players. After one such player quit the team because of minimal playing time, either the player or someone in his family sent a letter to the Cornwall press: “It has been repeatedly said that a country player going to town has never yet been given a fair chance, and till Cornwall awakens to this fact I am afraid that the country supporters in general, will cease to patronize their home team . . . thus leaving a big gap both in the social and financial side of it and thereby killing an old and favorite pastime, lacrosse.”³³

Several factors influenced league attendance and support for the new sport. Chief among them was the degree to which NHL fans found box lacrosse appealing. In a lengthy feature story on “Summer Hockey,” writer Robert Reade believed the league depended on hockey fans for survival: “A rose by any other name may smell just as sweet, but it is doubtful if new lacrosse teams under other names would have got off to as good a start. At first almost their only capital was hockey goodwill.”³⁴ Sponsors of the league no doubt hoped to connect directly with these fans. Game programs were sprinkled liberally with advertisements for alcoholic beverages, liniments, auto repairs, and cigarettes.³⁵ The new league, however, also tried to appeal to supporters of field lacrosse. Reade noted that even though field lacrosse was as fragile as Humpty Dumpty, as antiquated as a Buddha statue, and as poor and innocent as Cinderella, many traditional field lacrosse fans thought the new sport emphasized the best elements of the old game—tight play around the goal, precision passing, and point blank shots on goal tenders—and minimized the worst aspect of the field game: slow play at midfield.³⁶

Defenders of field lacrosse contrasted their view of box lacrosse as a violent commercial spectacle with an idyllic image of field lacrosse as amateur, patriotic, and rooted in the Native origins of their country. The game reminded them of an old Canada not yet contaminated by economic crises originating in the United States. This older generation defined *professional* and *commercial* in negative terms. In a guest column entitled “When Lacrosse Was a Game,” writer Fred Williams asked readers to remember Canada’s heritage: “Do you know that, now that lacrosse has degenerated into one of our indoor sports and become commercialized like hockey it may be worth while recalling the days when it was in truth Canada’s national game, played by Canadians for the game’s sake and not for gate money?” Williams reminded readers of a romanticized version of the early history of the sport, a history of White athletes learning from noble savage Indians, amateur teams playing for the love of the game, and friendly transatlantic visits to England.³⁷ With the stock market crash of 1929 casting a dark shadow over the economy of the civilized world, some nostalgic Canadians sought refuge in memories of simpler times.

The shortage of leisure dollars during the early years of the Great Depression made the sports and entertainment marketplace very competitive. The new league competed with movies, weekend car and train trips, golf and tennis, and minor-league professional baseball. Even though baseball and box lacrosse appealed to different audiences, the fact that baseball doubleheaders on the weekend sometimes attracted crowds of over 10,000 fans quickly forced the lacrosse league to revise its original season schedule and minimize the number of Saturday games. Ultimately,

the dominating position that baseball occupied in the sport marketplace hurt the potential share of leisure dollars that the lacrosse league might capture. Besides competition from other leisure activities, the physical setting of box lacrosse matches affected attendance as well. Newspapers referred to Toronto's Arena Gardens and the Montreal Forum as "sticky," "humid," and "sweltering" throughout the first month of the season. Management in Montreal, however, eventually pumped cool air through the ventilators that the Forum used to warm the building in the winter.³⁸

Whereas the hot weather dissuaded many hockey fans from attending lacrosse games, the high unemployment rate prevented some potential fans from even considering attending a game. According to the 1931 national census of Canada, the unemployment rates for men on June 1 in the league's three cities were 16.9% in Montreal, 16.2% in Toronto, and 13.2% in Cornwall.³⁹ Unofficially, these rates were likely higher. The best example of how the poor economy hurt league attendance occurred on August 24, which was election day. Only 200 spectators showed up in Montreal to see the Canadiens play Cornwall. Many fans joined other city residents to wait for the election returns and to see if the Liberal Party would hold onto power.⁴⁰ The Cornwall Colts were a poor drawing card on the road, but the season-low attendance at the Forum had more to do with the election and the economy than it did anything else. Although fans of the NHL versions of the Canadiens, Maroons, and Maple Leafs all found a way to support their winter teams during the early years of the Great Depression, there were not enough idle hockey fans willing to patronize box lacrosse during the summer.

Owners were very concerned with the competitive balance of the league and the impact of lopsided scores on attendance. As the season unfolded, the Cornwall Colts demonstrated that they could not hold their own against the other three teams. Anticipating a small crowd, the league even canceled Cornwall's last road game in Montreal.⁴¹ Although only some league contests resulted in blowouts, the typical game featured more total goals scored than what fans expected to see in hockey games. The league's policy of banning players from using longer lacrosse sticks, because league officials believed it might reduce rough play, probably contributed to the larger number of goals scored. In Robert Reade's feature on "Summer Hockey," he argued that some of the problems plaguing lacrosse in the summer of 1931 were reminiscent of the crises that professional field lacrosse faced before the First World War: "In short, has lacrosse been reborn only to be killed again? Is it a phoenix that has risen from its ashes only to fall after a brief fl[i]ght into a bigger cinder heap? . . . Is there, along with a revival of lacrosse, a revival of roughness that will kill it in public favor?"⁴²

Violence on and off the field consistently tarnished the league's image. Body checking, collisions, and swipes of the lacrosse stick produced bruises, cuts, dislocations, and sprains, as well as broken noses, ankles, and hands. During one game, for instance, Maroons' center man Kelly DeGray struck Canadiens' attack man Lionel Conacher in the face with his stick. Nelson Stewart of the Canadiens promptly retaliated and knocked DeGray out cold.⁴³ Though some games certainly produced "clean" play with few penalties, other contests featured accusations of tackling, cross-checking, slashing, and butt-ending, as well as fistfights, brawls, and riots involving spectators. On August 18 referees handed out a season-high twenty-nine penalties during a Maroons victory over the Canadians.⁴⁴ When the Colts shifted one of their home games to nearby Brockville, Ontario, on September

4, the local press condemned rough play. “Nobody expects to witness a parlor game when attending such a contest,” the *Brockville Recorder and Times* observed, “but the average individual has no desire to spend his money for the purpose of witnessing a slugging match and of seeing participants making rather a sorry exhibition of themselves.”⁴⁵ Late in the third period of a game on September 22 several fistfights between the Colts and Canadiens led to bottles flying from the stands and about 50 spectators pouring onto the field before policemen restored order.⁴⁶

Episodes of violence on and off the field resulted in league president Caron issuing suspensions. Recognizing that excessively violent play would turn some fans away from the new sport, Caron warned players to control their behavior. When Caron suspended Lionel Conacher for poking a referee in the eye, the president showed that even a star could not escape his wrath.⁴⁷ Probably the most controversial episode of the season occurred on September 15 when Maroon defense man Bill Coulter delivered a hard check to Colt Rube Whitford. When Whitford retaliated against Coulter, referee Oliver Secours stepped in and penalized Whitford, who then assaulted Secours in the face. Several days later, Caron suspended Whitford for the season.⁴⁸ Caron declared the league would stop excessive violence: “A man who cannot take his cracks in a sportsmanlike manner does not belong in the game, and the league will do its utmost to keep such players out.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately for Caron, his central role in a scandal involving profits generated from a hydroelectric project might have undermined his moral authority in the eyes of some players and coaches.⁵⁰

Although owners worried about the impact of violent play on gate receipts, thousands of fans did turn out to support the clubs in Montreal and Toronto. The largest crowd of the season—8,000 fans—crammed into the Montreal Forum to see the last regular season game, a playoff-clinching victory by the Canadiens over the Maroons. Between 5,000 and 7,200 spectators saw each of the three championship series contests between the Canadiens and Maple Leafs in early October. Despite the late surge in attendance in both Toronto and Montreal, the champion Canadiens fared worse financially than did the Maple Leafs for the season as a whole. Cattarinich and Dandurand netted a \$15,000 loss, but Campbell’s Maple Leafs lost only about \$1,000.⁵¹ Despite the financially risky nature of the new sport, promoters from other cities tried to join the league. In August and September the league received applications from Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City, and Ottawa. The Montreal and Toronto sportsmen who dominated the league, however, paid close attention to potential travel expenses, the financial resources of a new owner, and the likelihood of the new franchise being able to field a competitive club. The men behind the bids included a virtual who’s who of professional hockey and arena management: Sidney N. Strotz, John S. Hammond, Lester Patrick, Jack Adams, Arthur Ross, Tommy Gorman, Happy Holmes, and Eddie Livingstone.⁵²

The most significant inquiry came from the NHL Maple Leafs. Even before the season ended, the league approved the sale of the Maple Leafs lacrosse club and the contracts of manager Eddie Powers and all players residing in Toronto by Peter Campbell to Maple Leaf Gardens, Ltd., which owned the NHL Maple Leafs. In return, the league gave Campbell an expansion team in Toronto that would use a different nickname and the rights to contracts of his current players who lived outside of Toronto, especially Native star Scotty Martin, who finished second only to

Conacher in scoring.⁵³ The transaction could have made the league a five-team loop, but the fate of the Cornwall Colts remained in doubt during the season, especially with rumored relocations to Toronto, New York City, or Boston.⁵⁴ In December, Colts management sold the franchise and the rights to its players to the league. The Colts claimed the league's intention to expand into the U.S. made remaining in the league cost prohibitive. According to Colts manager William C. Burns, "It would be impossible for us to break even financially with long trips of this nature to add to the already heavy expense of running the team."⁵⁵

Throughout 1931 amateur field lacrosse organizers in Canada felt compelled to confront the possibilities offered by the new sport. The excitement generated from the pro circuit inspired provincial governing bodies to create their own leagues. As early as January 1931, Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association secretary Gene Dopp canvassed senior clubs throughout the province about their interest in staging games in idle hockey arenas.⁵⁶ By late May the OALA endorsed a special series of box lacrosse matches involving senior clubs at Sunnyside Stadium under outdoor floodlights.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, on the west coast, the British Columbia Amateur Lacrosse Association agreed to an experimental series of games among the Home Oil Distributors club of Vancouver, the Squamish Indians, and a team calling themselves "the Pros." Many lacrosse players in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia preferred the new condensed game over field lacrosse, but they still had to complete their field lacrosse schedules and determine which clubs would participate in the Mann Cup championship series. Not everyone agreed, however, with the move to embrace the abbreviated game. Several officers in the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association and the OALA resigned to protest what they viewed as a capitulation to commercialism.⁵⁸

By the time the eastern field lacrosse champions of Canada, the Brampton Excelsiors, arrived on the west coast to play the western champions, the New Westminster Salmonbellies, momentum was growing in support of box lacrosse. Days before Brampton won the Mann Cup, the CALA's provincial delegates shocked the field lacrosse community when they voted to replace the field game with box lacrosse as the official sport of the Mann Cup championship series for 1932. They chose the new game mainly because they viewed it as a livelier sport and because the smaller roster would reduce traveling expenses. At the beginning of the meeting, only the delegates representing western Canada supported the switch. When eastern delegates first arrived at the meeting, they had only intended to discuss the future of the sport and possibly vote on creating a separate championship series. Apparently, however, the minority of western delegates managed to sway enough eastern delegates to vote for the adoption of box lacrosse.⁵⁹

The national governing body's decision offended some older enthusiasts in Ontario. One critic told the readers of the *Toronto Mail and Empire* that the CALA should have introduced the new sport among youth before embracing such a radical move. Although he admitted the Association voted for the change "because of the economy of cost and playing area" afforded by box lacrosse, the letter writer worried that too much of the appeal of the new sport was rough play.⁶⁰ More importantly, the CALA's decision to use a box lacrosse format for the national championship likely meant that many ordinary players might abandon field lacrosse altogether. According to the *Toronto Daily Star*, this development might hurt Canada's chances in future international contests: "The box lacrosse idea would have Canada in a

position of splendid but undesirable isolation.”⁶¹ Despite the misgivings of some organizers in Ontario, many clubs quickly assembled box lacrosse leagues to operate in the fall before the commencement of hockey season. By the following spring, the governing bodies of amateur lacrosse in both British Columbia and Ontario voted to replace field lacrosse with box lacrosse as their official sport.⁶²

Shortly after the CALA made the switch to box lacrosse, the professional league attempted to establish a connection with the field lacrosse community. Just before the pro season ended, owners decided that their champion should challenge for the oldest championship cup in Canadian lacrosse, the Minto Cup. The current holders of the cup were the New Westminster Salmonbellies, who had just lost to the Brampton Excelsiors for the Mann Cup. The professional league wanted to play for the Minto Cup in October, after the completion of their league championship series, but the Salmonbellies preferred to wait until the following spring. New Westminster told the pro league that they were not confident about the financial viability of hosting a championship cup series, especially after the club had just asked local fans to support the Mann Cup series. Even when league president Adolph Caron told the Salmonbellies that the pros would pay their own way so long as they received a share of the gate money, the Salmonbellies declined.⁶³

Meanwhile, during the sport’s inaugural season, the new box-lacrosse phenomenon intrigued lacrosse coaches in the U.S. They were amazed with the large crowds that crammed into arenas in Toronto and Montreal. The faster pace of box lacrosse inspired them to consider rules changes for the collegiate game. What baffled Americans most about box lacrosse, however, were the references to the new sport having been invented in Australia. Several Americans sent letters to lacrosse officials in Australia to verify the story. Roy Taylor of the Crescent Athletic Club of Brooklyn, who was also chief referee of the United States Intercollegiate Lacrosse Association, sent a newspaper clipping citing large crowds of fans watching box lacrosse in Australia to Howard R. Balmer, the Honorable Secretary of the Victoria Lacrosse Association. Balmer replied that he was “entirely at a loss to know where this rumor originated.” Balmer, however, did admit that, occasionally, Australians held an annual “gala days,” which included informal contests of two teams of six or seven men playing lacrosse on 50-yard fields in games of only ten minutes in length. These games attracted crowds of only 250 spectators, far short of the ten to twenty thousand fans mentioned in the first stories published in Canadian newspapers. When coach Laurie Cox of Syracuse University sent an inquiry to I. J. Taylor, Honorable Secretary of the Australian Lacrosse Council, he received the same reply. Australian officials essentially implied that the Australian box lacrosse story was a hoax.⁶⁴

Apparently, the Canadian box lacrosse entrepreneurs believed that they needed this fictional Australian story to help generate interest in their new league. Early negative feedback, however, probably prompted the league to offer an official explanation for the origin of box lacrosse. In a 1931 game program for the Montreal Maroons, the league claimed that Cattarinich had been inspired to create “indoor lacrosse” after watching a lacrosse game played on ice skates during a recent winter carnival. What intrigued Cattarinich most about lacrosse being played on an ice rink, the story reported, was the high speed of the contest. Cattarinich believed that a condensed version of lacrosse played in hockey arenas during the summer would resonate with hockey fans. Conveniently, this official story

of “The Birth of Indoor Lacrosse” relegated the Australian tale to two sentences in the last paragraph.⁶⁵

After completing the 1931 campaign, the pro lacrosse entrepreneurs planned for a second season in 1932. After considering more applications from Baltimore, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Syracuse, league owners decided on February 4 that they would only add franchises in Boston and New York to the lineup that included the three surviving teams from last year and Peter Campbell’s new team, the Toronto Tecumsehs. To avoid staging games during the hottest part of the summer, the league also created a split season, with a break from early July to mid-August.⁶⁶ Although league owners put themselves in a position to avoid the small crowds that characterized the previous season’s games played on hot evenings, they lost their top gate attraction when Lionel Conacher decided to forgo box lacrosse in favor of professional wrestling.⁶⁷ To make matters worse, the Boston and New York teams withdrew from the league. As a result, the league reverted back to being a four-team circuit in Toronto and Montreal.⁶⁸

Another rival group of promoters created the American Professional Box Lacrosse League to stage night lacrosse in baseball parks. Among the sponsors of the new league were men connected to the amateur field lacrosse community, including Irving Leydecker, president of the USILA, as well as James A. Macdonald, who had served briefly as the Canadian league’s original president in 1931. Apparently, he convinced this league’s owners to stage all games in baseball stadiums at night. The franchises included the Baltimore Rough Riders, Boston Shamrocks, Brooklyn Dodgers, New York Giants, and New York Yankees. Even though the Canadian league already had two franchises in Toronto, the American league also selected that city as a site for a team. The new ABLL team owned by John R. Norris was also called the Maple Leafs, further confusing a local sports community that already had hockey, baseball, and box lacrosse franchises that were using that nickname. The American league owners also discussed the possibility of a lacrosse “world series,” not with the Canadian league but rather with a hypothetical team from England. To reduce roster and travel costs, the ABLL owners also decided that their version of box lacrosse would be a six-man game.⁶⁹

Oddly enough, the first professional box lacrosse game in New York was not the season opener of an ABLL franchise, but rather an exhibition between the Canadian league’s Canadiens and Maple Leafs. It took place in Madison Square Garden on May 10 in front of ten to twelve thousand people and several sport promoters, including NHL President Frank Calder.⁷⁰ According to a United Press correspondent who witnessed the exhibition, box lacrosse was an exciting sport to hear and watch: “It seems that the whistling of the racquets through the air (the strings), the cries of the players (the wood winds), and the poom-poom given off by noggins when rapped smartly by the sticks (the drums), create an effect similar to that of a symphony orchestra in full blast.”⁷¹

The regular season of the American league commenced on June 2, but few games were played. The Maple Leafs and Yankees quit the league after two weeks, and then the rest of the league went out of business on July 8. Games attracted between 2,000 and 2,500 fans each. The Canadian league did not last much longer. By the time the scheduled first half of the season finished, the Maroons folded and it became doubtful that the rest of the league would even resume play in August. Compared with the first season, league attendance in 1932 had declined significantly.

Even the league's decision to slash ticket prices in early June did little to boost ticket sales and prevent the league's demise. Meanwhile, two years of raids by professional clubs took their toll on amateur lacrosse in Canada. With the two-time Mann Cup champion Brampton Excelsiors' roster heavily depleted by defections to the professional circuit, the CALA decided to send a hastily assembled all-star team to represent Canada against the U.S. at the Los Angeles Olympiad in August.⁷² In contrast, the Americans used an eight-team elimination tournament that resulted in Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore serving as the U.S. representative. The more cohesive American team won two of three games to capture the unofficial Olympic lacrosse championship.⁷³

By the end of August, the International Professional Lacrosse League called off the second half of its season. Eventually, the Maple Leafs, Tecumsehs, and an all-Native team called the Buffalo Bowmans agreed to form a new Professional Indoor Lacrosse League, but this circuit also folded during the fall.⁷⁴ The poor economy hardly provided the hockey moguls who backed box lacrosse with the chance to succeed. These men, however, were hardly alone in facing such austere conditions. From 1930 to 1932, minor-league baseball suffered the loss of fifteen separate leagues, including the Class A Eastern League in July 1932. Many hockey fans who saw box lacrosse probably viewed the sport as an interesting novelty, but there were hardly enough of them to make professional box lacrosse economically viable. Regardless of the failure of professional lacrosse, the amateur game in Canada was never the same. By switching to box lacrosse, provincial associations and local clubs essentially isolated themselves from the international lacrosse community, which did not adopt box lacrosse. As for the owners of the Montreal Canadiens, they simply moved on to other business interests, purchasing another horse racetrack in July.⁷⁵ Unable to acquire the minor-league baseball Montreal Royals, Cattarinich and Dandurand recruited former big-league baseball manager John McGraw to help them try to buy and relocate a major-league franchise to Montreal. Throughout the fall they unsuccessfully tried to purchase first the St. Louis Browns and then the St. Louis Cardinals.⁷⁶

The history of box lacrosse during its first two years of existence in North America certainly demonstrated that a failed commercial experiment could profoundly affect amateur sport. The gamble that professional hockey owners staked their money on in 1931 and 1932 certainly did not pay off, but the experiment was certainly bold. As entrepreneurs, men such as Joe Cattarinich, Peter Campbell, and Joe Lally attempted to turn a profit during some of the worst years of the Great Depression, but as sportsmen they also hoped their version of lacrosse might revitalize Canada's national game. By partially resorting to a hoax to help generate interest in their new sport, however, these businessmen realized the great difficulty of maneuvering in the commercial marketplace during dire economic times. Whether their commercial failure was more the result of the crowded sport marketplace, the poor economy, or the new sport itself, box lacrosse became an entrenched part of the amateur sporting landscape of the very same Canadian small-town communities in Ontario and British Columbia that had supported field lacrosse since the late nineteenth century. Many clubs certainly believed the new sport was superior to the older field game, but in choosing the new sport they had effectively isolated themselves from lacrosse communities in the U.S., Britain, and

Australia. By reinventing Canada's national game in 1931, however, Canadian lacrosse enthusiasts were charting the same type of independent course outlined sixty-four years earlier when Canadians first embraced the old Indian game to help define the new Canadian nation as a distinct part of the British Empire.

Endnotes

¹See Donald M. Fisher, *Lacrosse: A History of the Game* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 43-52.

²On professional hockey entrepreneurs, see John Chi-Kit Wong, "The Development of Professional Hockey and the Making of the National Hockey League," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2001); Morey Holzman and Joseph Nieforth, *Deceptions and Doublecross: How the NHL Conquered Hockey* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2002).

³For examples see *Cornwall Freeholder*, September 19, 1931; Fisher, *Lacrosse*, 59, 158; *Toronto Mail and Empire*, June 26, 1931.

⁴*Toronto Daily Star*, April 20 and October 14, 1931; *Toronto Mail and Empire*, July 3, 1931.

⁵*Cornwall Freeholder*, February 7, 1931.

⁶*Montreal Gazette*, April 25, 1931; *Toronto Daily Star*, April 20, 1931.

⁷*Toronto Daily Star*, April 20 and April 29, 1931. In these and other newspaper articles, Macdonald is referred to either as "Jack," "Jimmy," or "Jas. A."

⁸*Montreal Gazette*, April 29, 1931. The league delayed the entrance of the Baltimore Druids and Brooklyn Robins until 1932.

⁹*Toronto Daily Star*, April 29, 1931.

¹⁰*Toronto Daily Star*, April 30, May 2, 1931.

¹¹*Montreal Gazette*, May 6, 1931. On Ernest J. Savard, see William Brown, *Baseball's Fabulous Montreal Royals* (Montreal: Robert Davies, 1996), 26-27, 32-35.

¹²On night baseball, see Larry G. Bowman, "'I Think It Is Pretty Ritzy, Myself,' Kansas Minor League Teams and Night Baseball," *Kansas History* 18, no. 4 (1995-1996): 248-257; Larry G. Bowman, "To Save a Minor League Team: Night Baseball Comes to Shreveport," *Louisiana History* 38, no. 2 (1997): 185-202; Bill Rabinowitz, "Baseball and the Great Depression," in *Baseball History*, ed. Peter Levine, 49-59 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler Books, 1989); chapter 5 of G. Edward White, *Creating the National Pastime: Baseball Transforms Itself, 1903-1953* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and David W. Zang, "A Dress Rehearsal for Night Baseball," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (1981): 109-112.

¹³*Montreal Gazette*, April 25 and 29, 1931.

¹⁴*Montreal Gazette*, June 19, 1931.

¹⁵*Cornwall Freeholder*, May 9, 1931.

¹⁶*Toronto Daily Star*, May 8, 1931.

¹⁷*Toronto Daily Star*, April 29, May 20, and May 23, 1931.

¹⁸*Montreal Gazette*, May 13, 16, and 21, 1931.

¹⁹On Lionel Conacher, see Don Morrow, "Lionel Pretoria Conacher," *Journal of Sport History* 6 (Spring 1979): 5-37; Frank Consentino and Don Morrow, *Lionel Conacher* (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1981).

²⁰*Toronto Daily Star*, May 26 and 29, 1931.

²¹*Montreal Gazette*, May 25, 1931.

²²*Toronto Daily Star*, May 29, 1931.

²³*Montreal Gazette*, May 25 and June 19, 1931.

²⁴Population figures included Montreal (818,577), Toronto (631,207), and Cornwall (11,126). Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931 II* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1934): 52, 79, 86.

²⁵*Cornwall Freeholder*, June 20, 1931.

²⁶*Montreal Gazette*, May 24, 1931.

²⁷*Cornwall Freeholder*, July 15, 1931; *Montreal Gazette*, July 15, 1931.

²⁸Attendance data was culled from the *Cornwall Freeholder*, *Cornwall Standard*, *Montreal Daily Star*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Toronto Daily Star*, *Toronto Evening Telegram*, *Toronto Globe*, and *Toronto Mail and Empire*. No data was available, however, for one home date each for Cornwall and Toronto. When conflicting data for games were found in different newspapers, averages were taken. Another Cornwall game was played in Brockville, Ontario, and attracted about 1,000 fans.

²⁹These stations were CKAC in Montreal and CFRB, CKCL, and CFCA in Toronto.

³⁰As cited in *Cornwall Freeholder*, June 27, 1931.

³¹*Cornwall Freeholder*, July 11, 1931.

³²*Cornwall Freeholder*, August 1, 1931.

³³*Cornwall Freeholder*, September 9, 1931.

³⁴*Cornwall Freeholder*, August 22, 1931.

³⁵International Professional Lacrosse League (IPLL) game program, Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Montreal Maroons, 1 September 1931 (Montreal: Gazette Printing Co.).

³⁶*Cornwall Freeholder*, August 22, 1931.

³⁷*Toronto Mail and Empire*, June 29, 1931.

³⁸*Montreal Gazette*, July 7, 1931.

³⁹Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931 VI* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1934): 1268, 1269.

⁴⁰*Montreal Gazette*, August 25, 1931.

⁴¹*Cornwall Freeholder*, September 30, 1931. The goal differential for the four teams demonstrates the uncompetitive position of Cornwall: Maple Leafs (+94), Canadiens (+56), Maroons (+7), and Colts (-157).

⁴²*Cornwall Freeholder*, August 22, 1931.

⁴³*Montreal Gazette*, July 8, 1931; *Toronto Mail and Empire*, July 10, 1931.

⁴⁴*Montreal Gazette*, August 19, 1931.

⁴⁵As cited in *Cornwall Freeholder*, September 12, 1931.

⁴⁶*Cornwall Freeholder*, September 23, 1931; *Montreal Gazette*, September 23, 1931.

⁴⁷*Cornwall Freeholder*, August 1, 1931.

⁴⁸*Toronto Mail and Empire*, September 16 and 21, 1931; *Cornwall Freeholder*, September 16, 1931.

⁴⁹*Montreal Gazette*, October 2, 1931.

⁵⁰*Montreal Daily Star*, July 15, 1931.

⁵¹*Toronto Daily Star*, October 10, 1931; *Toronto Mail and Empire*, October 10, 1931. For winning the championship, each member of the Canadiens received \$67, whereas each Maple Leaf got \$50.

⁵²*Montreal Gazette*, July 28, August 1, 12, and 14, 1931; *Toronto Daily Star*, August 11 and October 9, 1931; *Cornwall Freeholder*, August 12 and September 26, 1931. Baltimore sportswriter and field lacrosse supporter Wilson B. Wingate also submitted a bid.

⁵³*Toronto Mail and Empire*, September 19, 1931; *Toronto Daily Star*, September 19 and October 9, 1931.

⁵⁴*Toronto Mail and Empire*, August 28 and September 19, 1931.

⁵⁵*Cornwall Freeholder*, December 12, 1931.

⁵⁶*Toronto Daily Star*, January 26 and April 16, 1931.

⁵⁷*Toronto Daily Star*, May 29, 1931; *Montreal Gazette*, May 30, 1931.

⁵⁸*Toronto Mail and Empire*, July 9, 1931.

⁵⁹*Toronto Daily Star*, September 15, 1931.

⁶⁰*Toronto Mail and Empire*, September 16, 1931.

⁶¹*Toronto Daily Star*, September 12, 1931.

⁶²Montreal *Gazette*, March 26, 1932; *British Columbian*, April 22, 1932.

⁶³*British Columbian*, September 22, 26, 30, and November 6, 1931; Montreal *Gazette*, October 2, 1931.

⁶⁴United States Inter-Collegiate Lacrosse Association, *Official Lacrosse Guide 1932* (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1932), 63, 68; Alexander M. Weyand and Milton R. Roberts, *The Lacrosse Story* (Baltimore: H&A Herman, 1965), 154.

⁶⁵IPLL game program, 21.

⁶⁶Montreal *Gazette*, January 28, 29, 30, and February 5, 1932. The owners probably discussed rumors that the owners of baseball's International League were considering forming their own box lacrosse league.

⁶⁷Montreal *Gazette*, April 13, 1932.

⁶⁸Montreal *Gazette*, May 4, 1932.

⁶⁹*Baltimore News*, May 2 and 6, 1932; Montreal *Gazette*, May 4, 1932.

⁷⁰*Baltimore News*, May 10 and 11, 1932; Fisher, *Lacrosse*, 159.

⁷¹As cited in *British Columbian*, May 10, 1932.

⁷²Montreal *Gazette*, July 18, 1932.

⁷³Fisher, *Lacrosse*, 153-155.

⁷⁴Montreal *Gazette*, August 30 and 31, 1932.

⁷⁵Montreal *Gazette*, July 15, 1932.

⁷⁶Montreal *Gazette*, January 12, October 5, and November 26, 1932.