Sport and the Cash Nexus in Nineteenth Century Toronto

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... professional baseball is a pure matter of business. Large salaries are paid to the players and heavy expenses are incurred in the management of teams ... Money must be forthcoming or the thing cannot go on ... Business is business and in baseball, as in everything else, owners are as much entitled to look out for number one as any other class of businessman.¹

On May 24, 1886, after Toronto's victory over the Rochester nine at Sunlight Park, so called for its proximity to Lever Brothers soap factory, the Globe's "Sporting News" headline declared, "A Large Crowd, A Beautiful Game, A Brilliant Victory." Lieutenant-Governor Robinson's short luncheon speech after the game also celebrated the occasion. By mentioning Anglo-Saxon characteristics, Imperial Federation, the union between nations, and baseball in the same breath, he elevated the contest far above mere play. Unfortunately, Robinson's hyperbole and the gushing press reports obscured economic facts and significance. The revenues generated by the game indicated that the financial potential of sport was finally realized in both the corporeal and psychological sense. Furthermore, the businesslike backdrop of the event signified the consummation of a lengthy and flirtatious relationship between sport and capitalism. Reflecting capitalist development, the mechanisms and structure of business infused and eventually saturated sport. By the late 1800s Toronto's sporting zeitgeist was indistinguishable from the cut-throat, day-to-day activities of brokers, commission merchants, lawyers, petty merchants, and big-time entrepreneurs. Athletics were expropriated as capital. The proliferation of sports and sporting teams resulted in competition for spectators and gate receipts, contributing to the emergence of spectator sport as business enterprise.

Toronto's decision to leave the smaller baseball markets of southwestern Ontario and join the International League appeared financially sound. Playing against Rochester, Syracuse, Binghampton, Utica, and Oswego

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promised larger crowds and thus greater profit potential. Although attendance estimates varied, reporters expressed surprise at the number of spectators. The Globe suggested that over three thousand watched, a number confirmed by the Mail. The News estimated the figure at nearly 4,000—a number accepted by the World. Although newspapers exaggerated crowd sizes, a figure of 3,500 finds corroboration. The grandstand was “comfortably filled,” reported one. Another mentioned that “a close call was made upon its entire seating capacity.” The grandstand’s capacity of 2,000 had 550 reserved seats situated in the middle at 45 cents per seat, 1,450 seats at 35 cents per seat, and 1,500 general admission tickets at 25 cents. Gate receipts totaled $1,130, a considerable sum in an era when the Board of Health paid unemployed workmen $1 per day for scraping the city streets. After the game the Toronto directors were jubilant. The season’s schedule included 98 games, 48 at home. In addition to gate receipts, revenue potential included the sale of refreshments and the lease of the grounds for practice and play to the Ontario Lacrosse Club, Toronto Football Club, and a number of amateur baseball clubs.

Although the game at “Sunlight Park” epitomized sports’ correlation with capitalism, the relationship was not always reciprocal or positive as initially their interests were antithetical. Time for sport meant time away from work. Worker resistance determined the length of the working day in the absence of state legislation. Free time for anything other than efficiently restoring labor power resulted in conflict between capitalist and worker. Time away from work also allowed workers to form unions, trade associations, and discuss strategies to further shorten the working day. Thus, leisure time, beyond that necessary for labor reproduction, whether organizing against the interests of capital or in recreation and sport, played a central role in the development of working-class culture. Gradually, however, antagonism between sport and capital eroded. Previously contested sporting time became sanctioned as various factions of capital recognized the financial potential of sport and sport consumption.

Capital’s opposition to sport originated in Puritanism and what Alan Metcalfe calls the “gospel of work.” Protestantism emphasized faith and hard work as a means of fulfilling God’s calling. Such an ascetic philosophy, fraught with contradictions, had economic implications. Hard work often resulted in the generation of surplus and the development of acquisitive behaviors, processes that repudiated the Puritan belief that building wealth was an end in itself. Resolution and thus absolution were possible if the surplus furthered God’s work and was not spent on frivolity or pleasure. In this sense, moneyed people who denied themselves pleasure in the face of temptation deserved salvation more than those without. According to Max Weber, the concepts of accumulation and austerity formed the cornerstones for the “spirit of capitalism.” The tenets of faith that encouraged hard work and discouraged spending the fruits of labor on pleasure found “elective affinity” with an economic system that valued labor