Roderick McLennan, Professionalism, and the Emergence of the Athlete in Caledonian Games

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The crowd gasped in horror as the young girl lay motionless on the ground. A doctor emerged from the grief stricken spectators and knelt beside her; however, it was clear nothing could be done. A large audience had gathered around the heavy hammer event that day and young Ellen Kavanaugh, age 13, had moved onto the pitch in order to get a better view of the contest. Sadly, with all eyes on the hammer thrower, no one noticed Ellen until it was too late. On May 24, 1877, at a Caledonian Games in Cornwall, Ontario, Ellen Kavanaugh was struck and killed by a 21-lb hammer thrown by the former Champion of the World, Roderick “Big Rory” McLennan. Although the newspapers of the period and Ellen’s parents completely absolved McLennan of any responsibility, he never forgave himself. One week later, in a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, McLennan stated with regard to the accident, “One thing for sure accrued from it: I shall never again, under any circumstances, allow myself to be dragged into athletic contests of any description. I am not, now, nor never was, a professional athlete, and for the future I shall cease to be even an amateur.” Although his admission that he was never a professional athlete is questionable, the tragic death of the young girl had a profound and lasting effect on McLennan. Moreover, the tragedy in Cornwall has historically overshadowed his emergence as a prominent Caledonian athlete whose accomplishments marked an era of change within Caledonian Games.

Although reference to Roderick McLennan’s (b.1842–d.1907) athletic career typically does not extend beyond the confines of the Cornwall

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accident, his contribution to federal politics and the military has received sporadic attention. Through connections he made with prominent businessmen on the Caledonian Games circuit of the 1860s and early 1870s, McLennan moved into a profitable railway-contracting career in the later 1870s. During the 1880s, McLennan abandoned the railway for politics and represented his eastern Ontario County of Glengarry for two terms in the federal parliament beginning in 1891. McLennan also cultivated an interest in the militia and was elevated to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding of the Stormont and Glengarry Battalion in 1897. In addition, McLennan used his wealth and station in support of athletics throughout his life as an instructor, patron, benefactor, and judge. The Dictionary of Canadian Biography recently cited McLennan, paying particular attention to his involvement in politics and the military, yet despite this recent reference, his athletic career has remained largely unexamined.

This paper examines the athletic career of Roderick McLennan as it pertains to the development of professionalism within the Caledonian Games of the latter nineteenth century. Specifically, the paper argues that the rise of individuals stimulated the growth of professionalism in this context, and, as a result, contributed to the introduction of tours and championship competitions, specialization, an increase in existing monetary prizes, the recruitment of athletes by sponsoring Caledonian Societies, and the promotion of individual participants in the media. The continued proliferation of professionalism in this context quickly led to the association of the Games with money. At least one historian has argued that the equating of professionalism and money with Caledonian Games ultimately led to a backlash by amateur athletic associations and the subsequent downfall of popular support for the Games during the 1880s. Although Caledonians had always offered prizes, the mid-1860s to early 1870s marked the beginning of professionalism within Caledonian Games.

The paper consists of five sections. The first three examine prominent events within McLennan’s athletic career. These include the impact of his “Champion of the World” victory in 1865, the creation of two “Starring Tours” that immediately followed the championship match, and, finally, the impact of Big Rory’s rivalry with Scottish hammer throwing champion Donald Dinnie. The fourth briefly examines McLennan’s contributions to sport in later life, and the final section provides concluding thoughts. Examination of the events in McLennan’s athletic career illustrates the extent to which prominent individual athletes emerged as central to the Caledonian Games experience during the mid-1860s and early 1870s.

The Caledonian Games in which McLennan participated were the North American version of Scottish Highland Gatherings and were a popular sporting attraction both in Canada and the northeastern United States during the last half of the 1800s. A recent publication has pointed to a Highland Gathering in Glengarry, Ontario in 1819 as one of the initial