“In the Field of Sport at Home and Abroad”: Sports Coverage in Canadian Daily Newspapers, 1850–1914

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During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mass-circulation newspapers emerged in Canada. At the same time, this developing daily press devoted more and more attention to sport. As a result, daily newspapers were instrumental in creating local and national audiences for sport in Canada. Because much of this increased sports coverage focused on local happenings, the media helped generate public interest in a city’s teams and athletes. Reports on local clubs and events encouraged spectatorship and helped create a sense of community spirit and civic pride around a city’s sports teams. At the same time, newspaper coverage of major sporting events occurring outside the city, in other parts of Canada and the world, connected readers to a much wider community of fans and followers of sport. In conjunction with the telegraph and wire services, mass-circulation newspapers constructed a community of interest around sport in North America. This community of interest was composed of people who discussed, cared about, and paid attention to the same sporting events, no matter where they lived. A “world of sport” was created by the mass media—one that embraced both amateur and professional sports and included leagues, games, teams, athletes, events, statistics, stories, myths, and heroes. This world of sport can also be thought of as a shared pool of information about sport—information meaning not only news and factual data but also the broad range of ideas, symbols, meanings, and knowledge that constitutes the world of sport. In other words, the world of sport is an information system that links people together in a transnational community of interest. With the spread of the daily press throughout Canada, people across the country gained access to a shared body of information about sport. Thus, media experiences of major sporting events involved
Canadians in a world of sport that extended across provincial and national boundaries.3

This article looks at one crucial stage in the development of media coverage of sport in Canada—the expansion of sports coverage in Canadian daily newspapers between 1850 and 1914. Through heightened coverage of local sports happenings, urban dailies helped create local audiences for sport in Canada. At the same time, the mass media played an important role in building a shared sports information system throughout the country. As a result, this article examines the process by which daily newspapers drew Canadians into local and national communities of interest centered on sport. How did Canada’s urban daily press develop between 1850 and 1914? What was the nature of sports coverage in Canadian dailies at this time? Why did the prominence of sport in the pages of Canadian newspapers increase significantly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? How was this increase in sports coverage related to other changes in the newspaper industry in this time period?

By examining media coverage of sport before the first World War, this study aims to shed new light on the cultural history of sport in Canada. Although Canadian intellectuals have generally resisted the idea of viewing sport as a form of culture, the hierarchical distinctions that earlier cultural critics had made between high culture and popular culture have been breaking down over the past two decades. As a result, more scholars are beginning to recognize the social significance of mass culture, commercialized leisure, and sport.4 At the same time, increasing interest in social and cultural history has caused sport to figure more prominently in the work of historians. The field of Canadian sport history has also been reshaped in recent years as growing numbers of historians successfully connect the history of Canadian sport with wider changes in society and social relations.5 Despite the prominence of sport in Canadian life, however, historians have taken only the first steps toward putting together a comprehensive analysis of sport in Canadian popular culture.6 Similarly, there have been few attempts at examining either the role of the media in Canadian sport or the place of sports coverage and sports programming in the Canadian media.7 In particular, there is no comprehensive study of the development of sports coverage in Canadian daily newspapers.

This article addresses these gaps in the study of sport, media, and culture by analyzing the first phase of the growth of press coverage of sport in Canada. This study also employs recent historical research on Canadian newspapers in new ways. First, it pays particular attention to examining sports coverage within the context of the overall development of the mass press in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada. Second, it synthesizes the findings of a number of secondary sources that deal with important issues related to sports reporting in Canadian newspapers during this time period. Although these studies do not take sports coverage as their primary focus, they contain valuable insights and information that