Fred Simpson Is No Tom Longboat: Public Memory and the Construction of Historical Knowledge

Janice Forsyth and Josh Archer
University of Western Ontario

In 2009, a photo of the 1908 Canadian Olympic team landed by chance in the hands of a colleague who began a project to identify all of the people in the image. Gradually, he collected information about the athletes from relatives of the team who had learned about the project through various media, as well as from comparing pictures of the athletes found in other sources to the photo in his possession. One day, while narrating the story of his investigation to me, I became interested in his description of how the “Native-looking” athlete on the team was identified. At first he thought it might be Tom Longboat, the famous Onondaga from Six Nations, Ontario.1 He showed me the photo and I agreed: the athlete looked like Longboat. He seemed tall enough, was thin like a distance runner, and had a darker skin tone than the rest of his teammates. But the facts did not match up. Longboat was supposed to be in Ireland preparing for the Olympics, not with the team in England in July 1908, when the photo was taken. If the athlete was not Tom Longboat, then who was he? My colleague explained: a relative of one of the athletes told him it was Fred Simpson, the other Native athlete on the team.2

What I find interesting about the encounter is the misidentification of Simpson by two scholars, one whose area of expertise is in Olympic history and the other in Canadian Aboriginal sport. The incident was jarring. How did we not know there was another Native athlete on the same Olympic team as Longboat? Moreover, who was Fred Simpson? How had researchers overlooked him for so long? And what were the implications of this omission on our understanding of Native and Canadian sport history? Together, these questions served as the impetus for a research project that I began soon after learning about the photo, and to which the second author, Josh Archer, has made a significant contribution.3

In this article, we address the above questions by (1) examining the exclusion of Fred Simpson from public memory and exploring the politics surrounding the dynamic nature of constructing meaning from what little information is available about him, and (2) analyzing the discursive relationship between Simpson and Longboat as framed in the print media in Peterborough, Ontario—the town that
adopted Fred as their athletic ambassador when he was a competitive runner. Specifically, we are interested in how Simpson and Longboat are framed in relation to each other in the media in the context of historically situated power relationships, where race and ethnicity are usually understood to be key markers for racism and discrimination. Given the fact that most investigations of Native representations in sport tend to focus only on one athlete (a traditional biographical approach in history), this paper will extend our scholarly understanding of Native and Canadian sport history by taking into account the discursive effects that result when the representational positioning of two high-profile Native athletes are held up against each other. Throughout, we will foreground Simpson’s lesser known rather than Longboat’s often discussed story in an effort to also expand the historical record on Aboriginal athletes in Canadian sport, a record that is dominated by the stories of a small handful of athletes, with Longboat’s account (and his image) being the most prominent.

Evidence for this work is drawn from the two leading commercial dailies in Peterborough that regularly featured articles about Simpson: the Peterborough Examiner and Peterborough Review. A comprehensive search for items relating to Simpson in both newspapers for the years 1906 to 1912 (spanning Simpson’s entire running career) produced a combined total of 289 articles. Of that number, 87 articles (30%) included some discussion of Fred Simpson and Tom Longboat. All of the items were then catalogued in a chronological order and analyzed for themes. Our findings revealed some clear patterns in reporting, which, at first glance, suggest not all mediated representations of Native athletes were founded on racist stereotypes—a perspective that could easily be gleaned from the scholarly literature on the subject. In point of fact, different newspapers used different reporting strategies to sell hardcopy to the public, with the result that the media did not treat all Native athletes the same way. In the case of Longboat and Simpson, the athlete most remembered by the public (Longboat) typically had more colorful commentary than the lesser known “other” athlete (Simpson), and this was largely a function of the business of media as well as who was doing the reporting.

Public Memory and Histories of Native Athletes

Public memory is a useful concept for understanding Simpson’s omission from the historical record. As a theoretical tool, it provides insight into the cultural processes of remembering and forgetting, as well as the politics associated with those processes. The term is used widely among scholars who are interested in tracking the ways people remember certain events over time. Popular questions they pose include the following: Why and how do people and groups remember some things and not others? What types of values and experiences are validated through those constructions? What values and experiences are marginalized or ignored? What factors lead people to change the way they view the past? And what are the practical implications of those inclusions and omissions? All of these questions are important, but our objective here was slightly different in that we aimed to write Fred Simpson back into history and examine the way in which he was positioned in the Peterborough press, and then offer some insight as to why he was forgotten in the first place. In light of this, we use the term public memory generally to mean a “human construction” that stems from intentional and unintentional insertions