The Sydney Millionaires and the 1941 Allan Cup: Regionalism, Underdevelopment, and Sporting Identity

Corey Slumkoski
Mount Saint Vincent University

In 1941, Nova Scotia’s Sydney Millionaires faced off against Saskatchewan’s Regina Rangers for hockey’s Allan Cup.¹ This trophy, awarded annually to Canada’s top senior amateur hockey club, was considered second in prestige to only the Stanley Cup, which was awarded to the champion of the professional National Hockey League. Although heavily favored, the Nova Scotia team eventually lost the title in a sudden-death playoff game. Drawing on over 75 articles about the Allan Cup published in the Sydney Post-Record between early March and mid-May of 1941, this article argues that Sydney’s sporting identity was tied to its economic underdevelopment, ties that contributed to a strong anti-central Canadian, and specifically anti-Montreal, sentiment.² Moreover, this article reveals how sport can bridge regional and national identities. Although the Allan Cup promoted a sense of nationalism by determining a Canadian champion, the localized Sydney coverage also promoted a regional stance—Sydney Post-Record articles were locally oriented and endorsed a pro-Sydney interpretation of events. In this manner, the Post-Record’s coverage of the hockey playoffs served two seemingly oppositional objectives by concurrently promoting both nationalism and regionalism. As Colin Howell has suggested, “shifting patterns of production, consumption and commercialization that accompanied the transformation of capitalism . . . in the years between Confederation and the Second World War” could influence conceptions of regionalism and nationalism seen in sport.³ In examining the link between sport, underdevelopment, and local/regional identity, this paper builds on Howell’s contention to reveal that the sense of regional alienation that had long permeated Maritime economic and political spheres could also be seen in the cultural or sporting realms.

Newspapers are an excellent source for uncovering notions of identity; as Benedict Anderson famously contends, the rise of print capitalism—newspapers—both contributed to the blossoming of nationalism as a concept of identity and provides us with a means to chart its rise.⁴ People read the same things and began to conceive of themselves as part of a broader “imagined community.” However, Anderson’s theory of nationalism tends to homogenize, and as a result, it obscures

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Corey Slumkoski is with the History Department, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Address author correspondence to him at corey.slumkoski@msvu.ca.
the presence of regional vagaries with the nation state. Critics of Anderson point out that nations are often characterized by internal cleavages; within each nation there are both stronger and weaker citizens, with the weaker elements not being fully incorporated into the national whole. Colin Howell has noted in reference to Canada that “the history of the country looks different on the periphery, and . . . real and legitimate grievances are embedded in the historical experience of marginalized peoples or of regions such as Atlantic Canada.” As such, the 1941 Allan Cup could concurrently be more than a simple hockey playoff; it could also be a symbolic contest between a dominant economic and political metropole and an exploited and underdeveloped periphery.

The role of newspapers’ local sports coverage in constructing community identity has been documented by Stacy Lorenz, who suggests that stories about “local clubs and events encouraged spectatorship and helped create a sense of community spirit and civic pride.” Key in this process were local sports teams, which Lorenz contends emerged “as symbols of collective identity.” Whereas local clubs were initially composed of community residents, as time went on, and as the division between professionalism and amateurism blurred, teams began to import skilled players from further afield. This was precisely the case for the Sydney Millionaires, which featured a number of players brought to Cape Breton to improve the club’s competitive chances. Yet even the presence of “foreign” players did little to quell civic pride. As Carl Betke argues, “It mattered not that those specialists knew nothing of the community they were representing; what mattered was that they be successful and the whole city be allowed to identify with that success.” What is more, sport—and the coverage of sport—could also help articulate “interurban rivalries.” While this was most often seen in communities that were geographically proximate—for example, Toronto and Hamilton or Halifax and Saint John—it could also, as this study shows, promote competition between cities located far apart, with widely different population bases, and differing economic prospects.

Although newspapers can be useful in revealing concepts of identity, they can also be problematic sources for historians. As Jeffrey Hill has suggested, newspapers tend to offer a narrative structure in which “fragmentary evidence . . . is dramatized with fictional embellishments . . . to produce a more interesting form of communication.” In this manner the newspaper “is not a passive text; it works on the reader just as much as the reader attempts to control or contain it.” This does not, however, invalidate newspapers as historical sources. When used judiciously—for example, when used not just as a means of recovering past events but also as a means understanding how past events were presented—newspapers can be a boon for the historian. In her study of the coverage of sexual politics in the University of British Columbia student newspaper, Christabelle Sethna makes the important point that newspapers can be read not only “as a record of events, as a force for social change, as an expression of editor bias, or as a reflection of popular sentiment,” but also as “a particular ‘construction of reality’ produced interactively by editors, reporters, advertisers, and readers.” In other words, newspapers represent the milieu in which they originate, and in reading newspapers “codes of meaning” are revealed that bring certain assumptions and values to the forefront. This paper attempts to draw out these “codes of meaning” as they were presented in the Sydney Post-Record’s 1941 Allan Cup coverage,