Realizing Sport History’s Emancipatory Potential: Don Morrow and the Maturation of Canadian Sport Studies

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For twenty years, the Sport History Review has been largely synonymous with Don Morrow, whose impeccable career in sport studies as author, editor, teacher, and supervisor of a bevy of graduate students, has contributed in many ways to the maturation of the field of sport history in Canada. So, when the editors asked if I would make a few opening remarks to a special issue honoring his contribution to the field, and to introduce the papers that follow here, I was quick to agree. Anyone who knows Don and his scholarly work will know of his deep respect for the canons of historical scholarship, his careful use of evidence, his concern for those whose voices have for one reason or another been silenced or ignored, and his attention to modes of presentation that allow him to communicate both to scholarly and nonexpert audiences. Over the years, Don has never wavered in his belief in history’s emancipatory potential, and he has always been open to a broad spectrum of approaches that might contribute to historical enlightenment and social progress.

For those prone to categorizing historians with reference to their particular philosophical or ideological approach to the past, Don is something of an enigma. Throughout his career, he has navigated across those categories, at times showing a deep respect for empirical research and the construction of straightforward historical narratives. Such an approach was evident, for example, in his study of the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association. At other times, he has invested in theoretical paradigms that allowed him to grapple with the cultural meanings of sport, as was the case with his work on “sporting heroes.” Whatever the subject, he was interested in the careful and historically contextualized interrogation of sources of all kinds: official records, diaries, newspaper and magazine articles, historical artifacts, visual images, or personal memories rendered through the interview process. He recognized how power was imbedded in language itself, in bureaucracies that attempted to control who could play and who could not, and in material conditions shaped by those who owned and controlled the productive process and tried to monopolize the implements of state power to control the field of play.

Don always had an affinity for the liminal rather than the categorical, probing the blurred boundaries involving identities of all kinds: amateur and professional,
proletarian and bourgeois, rough and respectable, masculine and feminine, ethnic and national, metropolitan and local, individual and social. His work—to use a term that is now often used to describe historical self-awareness—was always reflexive. In emphasizing the importance of subjective insight, moreover, he encouraged students interested in writing sport history as auto-ethnography to consider how their own life experience influenced their understanding of sporting culture. In all of this, Don understood that the historian has three important responsibilities: interrogate one’s sources and oneself, place both in the context of the time, and realize the emancipatory potential that exists in historical knowledge. Of course, as historians we understand that such potential will never be fully realized. Nevertheless, as historians Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer pointed out in their history of the Knights of Labour in Canada, “dreaming of what might be” has always been an important part of the making of a better world.3

In my own work I often describe sport a social technology, a contested set of practices and beliefs with the potential for individual and social betterment.4 Like all technologies, however, sport has its imperfections. Don never used this particular term to describe sport, but I always believed that he had similar convictions. When it came to marrying new technologies to historical presentation, however, he was a leader in the field, and his students were always well schooled in the best techniques available for reaching an audience. A little story to illustrate the point. A number of years ago at NASSH, when historians were just beginning to use PowerPoint and I had remained stuck in the age of the overhead projector, Don was the commentator on my session. As he finished his complimentary remarks about my paper, he very gently urged me to get up to speed, pointing out how the images I was using would be far more powerful if presented electronically. I had always been more attentive to crafting a verbal argument and presenting it eloquently than to connecting visually to one’s audience. Don’s intervention was important for me and made me far more attentive to the historian’s responsibility to speak to a broader audience and to use all of the tools available to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of the discipline.

The four papers that follow all speak to many of the issues that were central to Don’s work: the importance of interrogating one’s sources, the elaboration of the historical context surrounding particular events, the lived experience of individual athletes, telling stories of those whose voices may have been silenced, raising questions about the sport’s social value, and writing sport history in service of progressive ends. In the opening essay, M.Ann Hall and Bruce Kidd address the tangled relationship involving memory, personal reminiscence, and historical context in telling the story of Canadian high-jumper Eva Dawes, who won Olympic bronze at the 1932 Games in Los Angeles. Although her career in the 1930s suggested progressive sensibilities and activism, especially her participation in a Workers’ Sports Association Tour of the Soviet Union in 1935 and discussions about boycotting the “Nazi” Games in 1936, her later recollections, shared with the authors in personal correspondence and interviews, denied any activist leanings or political intent. Hall and Kidd carefully probe the motivations for Dawes’s expunging of her past. Finding it difficult to accept her claims or political naïveté, the authors place her reconstruction of her personal narrative in the context of wartime and postwar anticommunism and, in particularly, in the sobering impact of the wartime internment of Dr. Howard Lowrie, who had traveled to the Soviet Union with Dawes in 1935. That a respected physician could be arrested and interned under the Defense