A Nova Scotian Perspective of Canadian Sport History After the Metcalfe Attack

A.J. Sandy Young
Dalhousie University

It seems fitting that this paper—which is a synthesis of a presentation given in honour of the “grandfather” of Canadian sport history, Maxwell Howell—has as one of its central themes a backhanded tribute to the “father” of Canadian sport history, Alan Metcalfe.

Anticipating there will be a disparity in experience among those in the audience, I attempt to say something to the young about creative teaching; something to the middle-aged about the turning-forty crisis; and something to the really old, like Metcalfe, in defense of Local Sport History.

Three assumptions underlie the presentation:

1. History has little value if no one learns it.
2. Few people really care if a tree makes a noise when it falls in a forest and no one is present, especially if it falls in Ontario.
3. Basic differences exist between the Canadian and American experience, but only Canadians know what these are.

Addressing the last assumption first, I relate a true story about a famous baseball historian from Albright College, who, in addressing a North American group in Edmonton, Alberta, made frequent mention of the Harvard Guide. A Canadian graduate student asked him what the Harvard Guide is. His response typified the sensitive American attitude toward non-Americans. He said, “The Harvard Guide? Everyone in the world has heard of the Harvard ‘Goddamn’ Guide!” Of course, the Americans aren’t the only ones who don’t differentiate between Americans and Canadians. A German colleague once told me that you can recognize Americans or Canadians (and he meant by this an American or an Anglo-Canadian) by watching their reaction when they are confronted by someone who doesn’t speak English. The American immediately speaks louder.

Americans now feel that they know Canadians because they’ve watched Bob and Doug McKenzie of the Great White North. True Canadians, of course,

A. J. Sandy Young is with the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3J5.
know lots of Bob and Doug McKenzies. True Canadians also know Vicki Gabereau and Big Bobby Clobber.

Vicki Gabereau is a CBC radio host, and Bobby Clobber is a retired NHL hockey player. And Bobby’s brother Clyde, you may know, was a sport historian residing in Nova Scotia. It is by reviewing Clyde’s career that I hope to offer worthwhile suggestions.

I digress before getting into the life and times of Clyde Clobber. A few times a year I teach a weekend theory course for the Canadian Coaches Association. Throughout the years I have warned the class participants that while the weekend of rhetoric might be interesting, it would be of no real benefit for them unless they forced the ideas they consider to be worthwhile into their coaching behaviour. I also tell them that if they pick up only one or two things that actually become part of their practice, they should consider the weekend well spent.

It suddenly dawned on me at some point that I had spent years ignoring my own sage advice. Ever since then, I go to every conference hoping to take home at least one thing which I then try into my increasingly entrenched way of doing things. I beg the audience to do the same, challenging you to take home and utilize at least one thing you absorb. The hard part is using it—not hearing it.

I return to Clyde Clobber, who had learned his sport history from the legendary Marvin Eyler. He went naively into the world of secondary education assuming that his students would be as excited as he had been at the prospect of studying sport history. He faced grave disappointment when he discovered that, with a few wonderful exceptions, this was not to be the case. He had to work like a dog simply to keep them awake. He faced the panic-inducing need to spread the good stuff over the many weeks of the academic session. Looking back at the problem later, it seemed ludicrous; he then had already realized he couldn’t fit the material into five courses.

Surprisingly, one thing that had a profound effect on Clobber was a radio news report he heard having nothing to do with sport history. It described a Stanford University engineering student, whose term project was to make a machine that would climb the stairs in the theatre classroom. His machine did so while singing “Deutschesland, mein Deutschesland,” turned itself around, flung out an arm, hollered “Heil Hitler,” and blew itself up. The engineering student’s imagination and effort became a symbol of what was possible if students were really inspired.

Clobber really needed that inspiration, it being apparent early in his first year of teaching that he wasn’t turning his students on. Because he was completely dissatisfied, he asked a senior colleague, who had the reputation Clobber coveted, if he couldn’t act as his assistant, working with him while he prepared his lectures, sitting in on his lectures, and occasionally doing some of the teaching.

Clobber stole every idea he could fit into his own teaching personality. As a matter of fact, he stole from everyone who did anything he could use. Sometimes the ideas were still recognizable when they were “Clobberfied,” and sometimes they were not. Clobber listened intently when his mentor told the students they could do whatever they wanted, and he would somehow grade it. He