Broken Time and Broken Hearts: The Maritimes and the Selection of Canada’s 1936 Olympic Hockey Team

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On 17 April 1935, the Halifax Wolverines defeated the Port Arthur (Ontario) Bearcats 4–3 in the Halifax Forum to capture the Allan Cup, the emblem of senior ice hockey supremacy in Canada. This was not just a victory for the Wolverines and Halifax, it was also a victory for the Maritimes. Not only was it the third consecutive year that the Allan Cup had been won by a Maritime team, but tradition then dictated that Canada would be represented by the Halifax Wolverines at the following year’s Winter Olympic Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Given that Canada had never been defeated in Olympic competition, this suggested that a Maritime team was going to show the world that they were the best amateur hockey team on the planet. Thus, it was with anger and despair that Haligonians watched the Canadian Olympic team sail out of Halifax Harbour on 19 January, 1936 with not a Nova Scotian represented. This selected Olympic hockey team contained a collection of all-stars drawn from Ontario and Quebec (plus one from North Battleford, Saskatchewan), ostensibly representing Canada as the Port Arthur Bearcats. There was not a single Wolverine on board.

The perception of these events in the Maritime provinces consisted of two elements: the notion that the amateur ideals espoused by policy-making central Canadian hockey administrators were both outdated and inappropriate for the Maritime provinces, and that the application of these idealistic policies represented a deliberate attempt to exclude Maritime players from Canada’s Olympic hockey team. This perception was fuelled by widespread discontent with strict amateur regulations, and from a sense of regional grievance that swept Maritime politics during the interwar period. Maritimers viewed the absence of Maritime players as an act of
treachery by central Canadian hockey officials—just another example of the Maritimes being cheated of their rights by central Canada. That they could not prove these allegations did not sway Maritimers from their certainty.

Ronald S. Lappage looked at the issue of Canadian regional discontent in the world of sports as early as 1974. He found that sportsmen from both the western and eastern provinces resented what they perceived to be Ontario’s dominance of Canadian sport. Similar to the sense of injustice felt when the supposedly national economic policies of the federal government worked to the detriment of the peripheral provinces was the widely held belief that Ontario dominance within the national sporting organizations worked against western and Maritime athletes. They held this to be especially true of national championships, with favouritism being routinely given to athletes from central Canada. This was even more evident, they believed, during Olympic years, when western and eastern athletes were alternatively ignored or wooed by the Ontario sporting bodies. Victories over teams or athletes from Ontario thus took on a special significance, particularly when those victories also meant a national championship.²

Lappage wrote his dissertation before much of the historical literature on the regional discontentment in the Maritimes had appeared. There was little other than G.A. Rawlyk’s brief and unsympathetic account.² Since then, Maritime regionalism, particularly the Maritime Rights Movement, has received considerable scholarly attention. Regional historians have shown that the Maritime provinces were not only vociferous and active in their attempts to improve their lot within Canada but were also remarkably successful given the limited political pressure they could bring to bear in the House of Commons. They succeeded, in part, because a sustained campaign of newspaper propaganda convinced Maritimers of the justice of their position and won sympathy in other parts of the country. The supposed implementation of the Duncan Commission of 1926 gave both Maritimers and other Canadians the impression that the region’s economic problems had been alleviated. When this impression proved illusory in the worsening Depression of the 1930s, their western neighbours tended to view the renewed Maritime complaints as akin to begging. However, while Maritime protests of the 1930s did not yield the positive results of the previous decade, the pervasive local sense of injustice that underlay them endured.⁴

This sense of injustice transferred easily to the sports theatre and offered an immediate explanation for the Maritimes’ failure to secure Olympic representation. From an Ontario perspective, the operative concern was not region but class. Canadian Amateur Hockey Association (CAHA) officials were fighting to preserve the concept of gentlemanly amateurism against a creeping professionalism, which to the CAHA officials seemed particularly apparent in the recruitment and behaviour of teams from the Maritimes.