Competing Ideals: Athletics and Student Radicalism at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus in the 1960s and 1970s

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John Fairs some years ago outlined a conceptual framework that explains certain aspects of the history of intercollegiate athletics in Canada. He argued for the existence of a fundamental dichotomy between athletics and physical education, a dichotomy rooted in their separate and distinct origins. Intercollegiate sports began in the latter part of the nineteenth century as a student-initiated, extracurricular activity, which was carried on outside of the formal educational process. Physical education, in contrast, emerged from within the academic structure when universities introduced it as a component of a broader educational program. Physical training was clearly subordinated to intellectual and character development. As Dr. James Warren Barton, the first Physical Director at the University of Toronto, explained in 1908, “It is not the aim of the physical department of the University to make ‘competition’ its motto, nor to turn out only athletes whose prowess adds fame and luster to the name of the University. The real aim of the physical education department is to render men physically efficient to fulfill life’s duties, and to enable them to have a body that will stand any strain that rightly-guided ambition demands from it.”

As intercollegiate sports became more popular among students, alumni, and members of the general public, physical educators questioned whether such activities were compatible with an institution of higher learning. They seemed to belong more to the realm of business or entertainment than education and were associated with questionable ethical practices, chauvinistic fans, disorderly behavior, and anti-intellectual attitudes. John Bascom, President of the University of Wisconsin, denounced athletics in

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1876 as “ill-balanced, ill-directed, ill-sustained effort,” suggesting that if they could not be abolished, the best option would be to hire “a few persons, as we do clowns, to set themselves apart to do this work.”3 His words were prophetic, as any observer of the American college scene can testify.4 Although countless educators condemned what they regarded as abuses and excesses in intercollegiate athletics, the incontrovertible fact was that many people judged the worth of a university according to the performance of its sports heroes. The President of the University of Western Ontario said as much in 1929: “On this continent . . . [football] is exalted to a place of importance in the opinion of the student and the alumni and in the rating of the public which is to be taken so seriously as to be almost a measure of the institution’s academic standing.”5

Although Fairs was concerned mainly with the genesis of the intercollegiate athletic movement, he noted that the lingering effects of the athletics/physical education dichotomy could be detected as late as 1966 in the report of the Standing Committee for Physical Education and Athletics of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. The report recommended that intercollegiate athletics should not exist as a separate entity in the university structure, but rather should be part of a larger unit of physical education. The intent was to subordinate interuniversity sports to the wider goals of the educational program, a point that was reinforced in recommendations to have the university assume full responsibility for financing athletics (gate receipts to go directly to university general funds), appoint coaches who were full-time faculty members with academic status, and ensure that financial aid was not extended to students solely on the basis of athletic ability.6

Fairs acknowledged that he may have “oversimplified certain developments and that the generalized themes have to be modified for different institutions.” He encouraged scholars to pursue more specialized studies in order to determine how widely his hypothesis could be applied to the particular experiences of individual universities.7 This essay accepts the invitation, offering a case study of the athletics debate at the Regina Campus of the University of Saskatchewan in the 1960s and 1970s. Fairs focused on the histories of older universities, such as the University of Toronto, where intercollegiate athletics flourished in the nineteenth century, but he ignored newer institutions, which came of age during the baby boom era after the Second World War. Undergraduate enrolment in Canada jumped from 96,690 in 1959 to 187,049 in 1965 to 276,297 in 1970,8 giving rise to such “instant” universities as York, Carleton, Trent, University of Calgary, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, University of Regina, and many others.9 This expansion led to the creation in 1961 of the Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union, the first truly national governing and coordinating body for intercollegiate athletics.10

Another limitation of Fairs’ study was his neglect of the student viewpoint. He concentrated almost entirely on the ideas expressed by university