The Forgotten Games:
Fifth British Empire
and Commonwealth Games,
Vancouver, 1954

Jason Beck
University College of the Fraser Valley

Only fifty years have passed, yet few physical reminders remain of the greatest international sporting event ever held in British Columbia. On August 7, 1954, the Fifth British Empire and Commonwealth Games, hosted by the city of Vancouver, reached a climactic conclusion in the final hundred yards of the highly-anticipated mile race when the Australian world-record holder, John Landy, glanced over his left shoulder in a doomed attempt to locate his English rival, Roger Bannister, the first human to run the mile in under four minutes. At this precise moment, Bannister roared by Landy’s right shoulder, powered by his lethal finishing kick, before sprinting toward the finish line, capturing victory in the race the world press hailed as “the Miracle Mile” and “the Mile of the Century.”

Fittingly, this moment, caught forever in a three-meter-high bronze statue (Figure 1) of the two men, stands today at the entrance to Exhibition Park Fairgrounds at Hastings and Renfrew Streets in Vancouver and serves as the most visible reminder that this event ever took place in the city. As Jim Kearney, long-time sports reporter for the Vancouver Province, stated in his book, Champions: A British Columbia Sports Album, this race “completely overshadowed the sports carnival of which it was supposed to be just one small part. The Games had to settle for second place.” Indeed, this attitude has persisted in subsequent years. Surprisingly few scholarly works have been written on the 1954 Vancouver British Empire Games (BEG), and those works that do make mention of the Games generally focus on the Miracle Mile, rarely giving anything more than brief a description to other incidents, events, and characters.

This is quite understandable. As every sport historian is frustratingly aware, there are large gaps between areas of sport adequately studied and

J. Beck <jason_beck10@hotmail.com > is with University College of Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC, Canada, V3G 2Z2.
those that have, thus far at least, been neglected. More importantly, the four-minute mile is now little more than a relic of a different era; it is a concept that has lost much of the significance it once possessed. The records of Bannister and Landy have since been bettered hundreds of times because of improvements in technology and training, but, in the mid-1950s, it truly was a miraculous accomplishment for a human to run a sub-four-minute mile, a seemingly impossible feat that the Western press referred to as “sport’s Mount Everest.” Yet, just as Mount Everest lost at least some of its captivating power in the years after Sir Edmund Hillary’s ascent, the same is true for the Miracle Mile and, even more so, the largely overshadowed stage upon which Bannister and Landy performed in such dramatic fashion.

The purpose of this article, then, is to discuss the 1954 British Empire Games in a broader fashion, shedding light on elements, incidents, and personalities often overlooked, in order to gain a more complete understanding not only of this important event but also of British Columbian sport and society, especially in postwar Vancouver. With this in mind, my