“Splendid But Undesirable Isolation:”
Recasting Canada’s National Game
as Box Lacrosse, 1931-1932

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Canadian nationalists and social reformers celebrated the sport of lacrosse as their country’s “national game” during the late nineteenth century. Working-class spectators, gamblers, and athletes who accepted pay for play, however, did not always embrace the middle-class cultural agenda of the national game. In the years preceding World War I, professional lacrosse clubs engaged in bidding wars for star players despite the fact that club revenue rarely justified high salaries. Brawls involving players and spectators, as well as administrative disputes among pro clubs, gave lacrosse a negative public image. After the war, lacrosse never regained the prominent position in Canadian sport life that it had once occupied. Baseball and softball became the summer sports of choice for many Canadians. Commercial sport promoters, however, launched a new indoor version of the old national game, which they called “box lacrosse,” against the backdrop of the early years of the Great Depression.

The entrepreneurs who introduced box lacrosse to Canada in 1931 owned National Hockey League franchises. Their new game was a modified form of the field game played by fewer men on an artificial surface laid out over the floors of hockey arenas. Although the lacrosse sticks were nearly identical to those used outdoors, much of the rest of the sport was borrowed from hockey. Indeed, the target audience of box lacrosse was idle hockey fans. This occasion, however, was not the first time modified forms of the outdoor game had been attempted in either the United States or Canada. During the previous half century, field lacrosse clubs had staged similar exhibitions at the fair grounds of Cornwall, Ontario, and in the old Madison Square Garden in New York City, among other places. An examination of the origins of this new sport illustrates the authority of commercial promoters in shaping culture, the various belief systems people attach to sport, and the unintended consequences of newly invented sporting traditions. Even though professional box lacrosse ultimately failed as a commercial spectacle, the new game dramatically affected Canada’s amateur lacrosse community and its relationship with its counterpart in the U.S.
Beginning in early 1931, newspapers in Montreal and Toronto introduced readers to “box lacrosse.” According to these stories, retired Toronto Tecumsehs player Jack Macdonald took a trip to Australia and noticed athletes in Sydney and Melbourne playing lacrosse at night under floodlights with only seven players on a side instead of the traditional twelve men. Even though Australians had been playing field lacrosse for decades, the Canadian newspapers reported, the impetus for “night lacrosse” actually came from John R. Thornby, an electrical engineer from Lehigh University in Pennsylvania who was contracted to work for the government of New South Wales. When Macdonald returned home, he allegedly told NHL owner Joe Cattarinich about the game. Cattarinich and Leo Dandurand were the principal owners of the Montreal Canadiens franchise. A former lacrosse player with the old Montreal Nationales, Cattarinich also owned several horse race tracks and was often the silent man behind the Canadiens. Dandurand usually represented the club at NHL meetings. Given the widespread popularity of ice hockey throughout Quebec and Ontario, Cattarinich and Dandurand hoped that the gamble on a new indoor version of what Canadians once touted in strong patriotic terms, even at a time of great economic turmoil, would pay off.

Plans for a league began to crystallize in early February 1931 when Cattarinich and Dandurand met in New York City with promoters from other cities, including New York Yankees owner Jacob Ruppert. Inspired by Macdonald’s stories of night lacrosse played in front of large crowds, their earliest plan called for two franchises in New York and one each in Brooklyn, Boston, Baltimore, Toronto, and Montreal. Each club would play in baseball parks under floodlights. By late April, the new International Professional Lacrosse League allotted not one, but two franchises to Montreal. Cattarinich and Dandurand owned one of the clubs and named it the Canadiens to attract their NHL team’s fans. The other team called itself the Montreal Shamrocks, paying homage to an old local Irish club. Both franchises made tentative arrangements to use Montreal Stadium, home of baseball’s class AA International League Royals, and hired well-known lacrosse veterans as coaches: Edward “Newsy” Lalonde for the Canadiens and P.J. “Paddy” Brennan for the Shamrocks.

In addition to Cattarinich and Dandurand, the actual driving force behind the league was the same man who had allegedly first discovered box lacrosse in Australia and was now the new league’s acting president: James A. Macdonald. Besides being a former lacrosse player, he was also a veteran journalist in Toronto who now apparently served as the front man for a company that manufactured floodlight equipment for outdoor sports facilities. Not surprisingly, he stood to profit personally from any baseball stadium hosting night lacrosse. Meanwhile, league management eventually settled on a six-team, four-city alignment: the two Montreal clubs, the New York Yankees, New York Giants, Boston Plymouths, and Toronto Maple Leafs.

Nailing down an owner for Toronto was no easy task. The lead candidate was Charles Querrie, a local investor with the Arena Gardens and a columnist with the Toronto Daily Star. A former lacrosse player with the old Toronto Tecumsehs, Querrie once owned and coached the Toronto St. Patricks hockey team before it was renamed the Maple Leafs. The prohibitive cost of installing lights at baseball’s Maple Leaf Stadium, however, made Querrie uneasy about the new sport. According to Toronto Daily Star columnist Len Smith, it was Macdonald and not Querrie who