In the age of exceedingly compensated professional athletes, the importance of amateur athletics within North American society has diminished. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the amateur athlete was a central figure in the emergence of sport as a means of social and cultural expression. Robert Wheeler wrote that the history of sport is one important avenue for gaining a fuller understanding of the past.\(^1\) The career of long distance runner Ronald John MacDonald is one such example. His narrative not only highlights the importance of athletics to society in the United States and Canada, but it also encapsulates the deep cultural connections between the Maritime provinces of Canada and the New England states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His athletic talents made him a sporting hero in Boston but, more importantly, created a sense of pride and achievement for people living in the economically downtrodden areas of northeastern Nova Scotia.

Ronald J. MacDonald was born in the rural village of Fraser’s Grant, Antigonish County, Nova Scotia, on September 27, 1875.\(^2\) He was the son of Lauchlin (Drover) and Elizabeth (Chisholm) MacDonald; his ancestors immigrated from Moidart, Scotland, to Nova Scotia at the turn of the nineteenth century.\(^3\) His father, employed in the bustling cattle trade between Bayfield, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland, drowned aboard the ship *Mary Ellen* during a trip in August 1888.\(^4\) Left without a husband and unable to make a living, Elizabeth moved her family to stay with relatives in the Boston suburb of Cambridgeport.\(^5\) The decision to immigrate to the “Boston States” was common for many Nova Scotians who were looking for better economic opportunities, and in doing so joined the “diaspora culture” of the period.\(^6\) The late Raymond A. MacLean wrote, “Boston! One could easily have yelled ‘gold!’ and received the same effect in Eastern Nova Scotia.”\(^7\) The high numbers of Maritimers who left for New England—25,000 by 1880—along with the geographical proximity of the old land to the new, ensured that traditional cultures were maintained and the relationship with their communities of birth remained strong.\(^8\) For MacDonald this meant a marked association with the social and religious customs of the Highland Scottish tradition.

By the age of sixteen, MacDonald had lived in the industrious and mercantile Cambridgeport for three years. He was employed as a lineman with the New England...
Marathoner Ronald John MacDonald

Telephone and Telegraph Company and later in the family lunch store on Cambridge Street. For young men like MacDonald, growing up in urban America during this period meant a familiarity with the emerging phenomenon of athletics. Sport was viewed by elements within society as a method to form a united national culture in a country that had been transformed by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and rapid immigration. One’s experience with sport depended largely on one’s geographical position because amateur sport during this period was an urban construction. For MacDonald and many other young men of Boston, access to modern sport in America came via the local gymnasium and athletic association.

The history of athletic associations in the United States is traced back to 1866 and the founding of the New York Athletic Club. The earliest clubs were elitist and selective, formed not to get people in, but rather, to keep people out. By the late nineteenth century, however, clubs were founded with an inclusive mandate and were extending their influence deep into the social essence. Neighborhood gymnasiums appeared throughout most cities of the northeast, including, most fortuitously for MacDonald, Cambridgeport. The Cambridgeport Gymnasium Association (CGA) was not as large as the Boston Athletic Association (BAA), but by the time MacDonald joined in 1895, it had a strong contingent of athletes, including Ronald’s brother, Alexander. As a prospective long distance runner, MacDonald could not have been more fortunate than to live in Cambridgeport. The city of Boston was the center of track and field in the United States and its nearness to other gymnasiums and to the track at Harvard University meant that the CGA had steady competition and decent facilities in which to train.

It was obvious from the beginning that Ronald MacDonald was going to be more than an average runner. Training under well-known sportsmen John W. Bowler and John McCanley, both of whom were active in the Boston sports scene, MacDonald won his first race in July 1896—a 1-mile handicap held at Newton, Massachusetts. Although a minor race, it was a notable achievement. He formed a friendship with Canadian Richard (Dick) Grant, who was a star track athlete at Harvard. Their training sessions together developed MacDonald’s talent and helped to propel him into the spotlight. At the BAA’s amateur cross-country race in December 1897, Dick Grant won the 4.75-mile race in a time of 25:58, followed by MacDonald, who traveled the wet and slushy course in the respectable time of 27:54. It was not long before MacDonald began constantly securing strong results. In March 1898, he won an 11-mile cross-country race in Boston in a time of 1:2:2, establishing a new record at that distance. Although athletic associations such as the CGA offered a lot of exposure, many qualified athletes looked to university sport as a means of gaining more experience and coverage. The first collegiate track and field associations began at Columbia University in 1869 and Yale University in 1872, respectively, and by the 1890s events were popular and competitive. In the fall of 1897, MacDonald entered Boston College (BC), in Boston’s south end, as a special student studying Latin, English, French, and arithmetic. Although not registered in a specific degree program, taking courses allowed him to represent the college at intercollegiate athletic events and helped broaden his profile. He performed as well under the colors of BC as he had under the CGA, setting the record for the indoor mile...