
NOVA SCOTIAN SPORT - THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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White Canadians frequently assume a superior air over Americans on the "Black Issue" because they often choose not to elevate it to "issue" status. While some would argue that the black person's fate is improving in Canada, as it was in the United States before Reganism; Canadians should not feel any more pride than Americans regarding their record. In present day Nova Scotia, the economic base for Blacks is still very weak.

BLACK LIFE IN EARLY NOVA SCOTIA

Slavery existed in Nova Scotia before the big Loyalist immigration in 1783-84; but the 1200 slaves who were part of this move were the real test. Slavery quickly proved to be unprofitable. By the time the British abolished slavery in 1833, none could be found in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotian Blacks were nonetheless no more "equal" than were Black-Americans.

Disdain Based on Race

A local description of an upcoming regatta in 1858 is enough to establish the disdain with which Blacks were held:

It may be that tickets will have to be bought to get into the Dockyard to see the regatta. Anyone of any decency will not have the slightest trouble gaining admission. It is only a crowd of the dirtiest, raggedest [sic], and most foul smelling negroes, ragamuffins who were not negroes originally but are the same color now, and characters not to be named to polite ears - human scum who usually monopolize and poison the ear - will only be kept out KEEP THEM OUT. (Acadian Recorder, September 4, 1858).

Blacks suffered disdain of this sort as well as other indignities at least as long in Nova Scotia as they did in the United States. In some eyes, a worse condition was that which described the pasttimes of whites as serious, even when it wasn't and the pasttimes of Blacks as farcical even when they were serious. Typical was a 1902 article which described the "Coloured hockey match and the Coloured races" as having kept the audiences in the best of humour during the evening (Dartmouth Patriot, March 8, 1902).

Geographic Segregation

Geographic segregation certainly accounted for much of the racial separation in sport. Nineteenth century clubs, like the Chebucto A.A.C., ran track and field days, tug-o-war and other winter "athletic contests" at the local rink (Dartmouth Free Press citing ads run in 1892 [N.S. Archives], November 8, 1962). These local events still

continue in Black neighborhoods; but in addition to friends competing with friends, there were other color-lines drawn.

An 1892 article advertised an athletic contest to be held at a venue which invited Black competitors from beyond their small "communities":

The last tournament of the season will be held this week in the Exhibition Building at Halifax and will be for coloured contestants only. Those entered from Dartmouth for the running races and Boxing Matches include: Joe Provo, James Brown, James Williams, Edward Lee, John Mansfield, Edward Brown. The Dartmouth Victoria's will enter a 1400 lb and a 1600 lb tug of war team (Dartmouth Free Press citing an 1892 ad [N.S. Archives], December 13, 1962).

This was probably an annual affair. It was certainly a repeat of an identical tournament held the previous year.

Separate Contests

A special league for Black hockey players began in 1900. It was called the Coloured League. The Halifax Eureka's and the Dartmouth Victorias provided the best of these competitions. It is ironic that this practice of separating players on the basis of race, which would have been considered appalling in later years, has recently been re-instituted for a very different reason. The Annual Nova Scotian Black Basketball Tournament and a similar golf tournament are now organized by Black groups as a means of enhancing Black cultural awareness. While this situation is exactly opposite to that which once existed, it does serve as an example of history coming back on itself.

Segregation based on race distinctions was an accepted way in Nova Scotia until the 1950's. The sporting world had but a few exceptions. The practice of holding special races for "coloured" at track meets existed into the 1900's (Dartmouth Free Press citing an 1894 sports article [N.S. Archives], February 13, 1964; Dartmouth Patriot March 8, 1902 and Dartmouth Free Press, July 1907). In some meets, separate prizes were offered for "Coloured Boys" and "Indians" (Dartmouth Free Press, citing an 1887 account [N.S. Archives], June 27th, 1957).

The following description appeared in the Dartmouth Free Press as late as 1956:

At St. Peter's Bazaar, William Brown, the coloured boy won the ten dollar gold piece. James L. Griffin won the parlor table (November 29).

The prizes are interesting; but the article points out the antiquated practice of dubbing William Brown "the coloured boy" long after such labelling was discontinued in the United States.

Baseball historian, Colin Howell, admits that though fifteen percent of his sample of nineteenth century Maritime provinces baseball teams were Black, there were only rare instances of inter-racial contests. Blacks started to play on White teams in the twenties with integrated teams being common by the thirties (Howell, 1990).

General Segregation

It is difficult to study early prejudicial practice anywhere, because biased practice does not make itself known in print until someone feels confident enough and has the outlet to complain about it. If it is safe to assume that things are slowly improving for Black Nova Scotians, then it becomes sensible to start at the beginning of public complaint and assume that things before that time were at least that bad.

As late as 1949, sociologist Ruth Wilson described Canadian prejudice against Blacks as varying in the same degrees as the patterns in Mississippi and New York. She pointed to Nova Scotia as the province with the greatest concentration of Blacks and also the one that suffered the most discrimination. Wilson specifically delineated overt practices such as:

1. refusing entrance to hotels;
2. imposing a ten dollar poll tax which kept the poor from voting;
3. having a lack of decent jobs to the point where there was not a single Black in the whole of the Nova Scotian civil service;
4. designating special "Negro Sections" in theatres;
5. limiting black teachers to jobs in Black schools.

While "official" segregation based on race is totally gone from Nova Scotia, other types of "healthy" segregation persist. Blacks frequently seek each other out when they go

to new places and conversely, enjoy hosting visiting Blacks. In 1956, the "Halifax Colored Citizens Improvements League" played baeball against Black U.S.S. Iowa crew members. "Following the game a dance was held at the George Washington Hall where Miss Olga Sparks was selected as Beauty Queen (Dartmouth Free Press, September 20, 1956)." This practice of Nova Scotian Blacks socializing with groups of visiting Blacks is common in the Province. Visiting African Blacks are frequently entertained by local Black groups.

BOXING

For Black Nova Scotian men, there is no debate as to which sport has produced the most success. Nova Scotian boxers have achieved international renown, though they invariably had to leave home to do it. Despite societal mores which did nothing to encourage them, the seemingly uncontrollable "need" of boxing fans, to see who was really the best in boxing, allowed the really talented Blacks to achieve far beyond the success possible elsewhere. The lives of those who achieve are studied. More is known of the lifestyles of those who succeeded in this most grueling of sports than is known about those who took part in other sports where competing beyond the neighborhood was not possible.

The Black Boxer's Life

George Dixon and Sam Langford, whose careers have been well documented by me and other more worthy sport historians, seem to fit the norm defined by Weinberg and Arond in their 1952 study, "The Occupational Culture of the Boxer." In it they describe all boxers as having come from a low socio-economic background. They also describe the relatively few who do succeed, as earning their money while young, squandering it while in their "up" years and immediately descending the economic ladder immediately upon the cessation of their boxing.

If it were feasible to compare either George Dixon or Sam Langford to other Blacks, born into abject poverty in the late 1800s, virtually uneducated, men who left home at an early age for another country without vocational skills of any sort, it would be possible to assess the degree of success they achieved. George Dixon's and Sam Langford's major contributions, taken in their time and place, remain steadfast. They presented the Black Man as a worthy competitor in the world of sport. It is quite possible that without them, and many others like them, North American society would be further from its alleged intended ends than it is now.

Professional boxing in Nova Scotia continues to be a successful spectacle. The Halifax Metro Centre was packed with more than ten thousand fans for the last two fights between Former Canadian Olympian, Chris Clarke, and Clyde Gray, (for two years, the number one ranked welterweight in the world). Had Canadian Champion Rick Anderson not been forced to retire early because of injury, his scheduled fight with Chris Clarke would have drawn a huge crowd as well. When promoters can offer the boxing fans local fighters of excellent ability, Nova Scotians are willing to pay. When such fighters are not available, professional boxing in Nova Scotia suffers.

BLACK SPORT PARTICIPATION IN MODERN TIMES

In modern times, Black Nova Scotian men and women tend toward many of the same sports Black Americans seem to prefer, perhaps for many of the same reasons.

1. A predominance of Canada's greatest boxers have been Black Nova Scotians. This trend continues.
2. Basketball is a favorite. More and more Black Nova Scotian men are going on to successful university basketball careers.
3. Football is coming into its own in recent years.

BLACK NOVA SCOTIAN WOMEN

Black Nova Scotian women, with one notable and a few minor exceptions, don't compete in serious competitive sport. A combination of racial attitudes and sexist practices are certainly part of the explanation (Hamilton, 1990).

Julie West and Savannah Metcalfe were exceptional athletes from the small town of Liverpool. West was named Dalhousie University "Female Athlete of the Year" because she excelled in both field hockey and basketball. Metcalfe was a "Canadian College Athletic Association All-Canadian" (the Canadian equivalent to Small College All-American), playing for Truro Teachers College. Truro's Sherry Jackson achieved the same honour playing for King's College.

Angela and Wanda Colley were outstanding university basketball players, Sylvia Colley plays university volleyball and Barbara Hamilton is a university soccer player. The fact that anyone would attempt to make a list of those who have competed at the university level and above speaks for itself.

Julie Barton is a young table tennis star who has competed internationally; but the only other Black Nova Scotian female to have done so was Marjorie Turner. Turner managed, through sheer individual determination, to overcome unemployment, single parenthood, years of chronic injuries,

and government apathy, to become a Canadian champion and an Olympic track participant.

Marjorie Turner

Marjorie Turner was one of four children. The Turners were the only Black family living in the small fishing village of Lockeport, Nova Scotia; but it did not take long for her to become known for far more than her color.

Marjorie and her sisters became basketball stars, when they led Lockeport High School to the Provincial title. She was also an outstanding soccer player. But few remember Turner for these accomplishments after Eldon Forbes, and her high school principal, Louis Fraser, arranged with the school board to have Lockeport High School represented in the 1964 Mt. Allison Relays. Turner was in Grade eleven.

Lockeport won the team trophy. That victorious team was Marjorie Turner. She, as the sole representative of her school, won all the running events and all the field events, to bring the "team" trophy back home.

She quickly entered the biggest Nova Scotian track event of the year, the Acadia Relays, and did it again, winning all the running events and the javelin and the discus.

That summer, Turner ran the 220 in 24.7, the one hundred yards in 11.1 and the one hundred meters in twelve seconds flat, a feat which placed her second in the Canadian

Olympic Trials in St. Lambert, Quebec. She was sixteen years old. Locally, she was named Nova Scotian Athlete of the Year and nationally, she received the Myrtle Cook Trophy, which is awarded to Canada's most outstanding Age-Group athlete. An injury kept her out of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964.

Broken-hearted when another severe injury kept her out of the Mexico Olympics in 1968, Turner retired from running and moved with her new-born son, Tony, to her husband's native Jamaica in 1971. In 1972, Marjorie and Tony moved to Vancouver, and in the midst of the stress accompanying her marriage break-up, she decided to chase her Olympic dream once more. Her schedule started at 5:30 every morning. She worked in a department store from eight to four, supped with Tony, trained for two hours, then worked in a hospital five nights a week, in order to support herself and her son. Eventually the task proved too much.

Turner ended up losing both jobs and was forced to live on a \$285 monthly welfare cheque. She watched her Olympic dream once again fade. The Munich Games were out of the question for financial reasons; but she nonetheless continued her training. A year later, she burst into the Canadian sport scene again. A west coast headline surprised more than a few track devotees when it described a Flashing Figure Out of the Past. Turner, after six years away from serious competition, won at the Vancouver Relays - the one hundred meters - in 11.7 seconds. She continued to run until

after a silver medal performance in the 1978 Commonwealth Games in Edmonton.

In the period between the Commonwealth Games of 1973 and the 1976 Montreal Olympics, she ran in Switzerland, East and West Germany, England, Rumania, Poland, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary and Chechoslovakia.

It is little wonder that Turner can not look back at her athletic career and say it was fun. She nonetheless stuck with it, not because she loved it, because in truth, she did not. Meets she found "a bit boring and awfully stressful".

When the eighteenth Modern Olympics were held in the twenty-first modern Olympiad in Montreal in 1976, Canada's premier female sprinter was twenty-eight year old Marjorie Turner. Having knocked one full second off her own Canadian record in the one hundred earlier in 1976, at the Olympic Trials, Turner qualified in the one hundred, the two hundred, the 4x100 relay, and as an alternate in the 4x400 relay. Now all she had to do was stay free of injury.

Finally, she succeeded. She won no medals; but she made the semi-finals in both the one hundred and two hundred and ran the anchor-leg in the 4x100 relay so fast that the Canadian team, which was expected to place sixth, placed fourth.

Even taking into account the flying start one gets in the anchor position, Turner's time (in the rain) was 10.8 seconds, the fastest she had ever run.

At any rate, when the Olympic flag came down, and the torch was extinguished, seventy thousand spectators lit yellow-green phosphorescent candles in what remains the most moving moment in Canadian sport history. Among those emoting quietly, smiling her ever-present smile and enjoying her devotion to the track more than she had ever been able to enjoy it before, was Marjorie Turner.

Her aging body ached all over, not from injuries to her legs and back, which had so often caused her great disappointment, but because her body had finally held up to the excruciating demands she made of it. She had made eight Olympic appearances in three different events. She and her three teammates set a Canadian mark in the relay of 43.17 seconds (Turner, several dates).

Despite her serving as the perfect role model for aspiring young Black Nova Scotians, none has risen to follow in her very fast footsteps. Dave Lucas from Annapolis Royal; Howie Jackson, from Bridgetown; and Leigh Skier, from Halifax did well in national competition but none excelled on an international scale.

BASKETBALL

James Naismith, from Almonte, Ontario, invented basketball in 1891. In the class of nine men he was teaching to be YMCA directors in Springfield, Massachusetts, were five Canadians. Of the five, three were from Nova Scotia. Lyman Archibald, though a Nova Scotian, upon completing his college education, took a job in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, where he organized basketball in 1893. Finlay G. MacDonald moved back to Stellarton and John G. Thompson, to New Glasgow; but neither YMCA had a gym. There is proof that the New Glasgow YMCA played basketball against the Halifax YMCA at the turn of the century; but it is not known who started it (Stephens, 1977, p.7).

In 1894, less than three years after Naismith had invented the game, basketball was played in Amherst (Mitchelson, 1970, p.9) and Halifax (Acadian Recorder, November 27, 1894). The Halifax "Y" had an eight team "House" league by 1895 (Daily Echo, January 17, 1895), offering both junior and senior basketball (Evening Mail, January 19, 1895) and by 1908, a City Senior League was formed. It was won by the YMCA, when they beat Dalhousie 29-12 (Acadian Recorder, March 13, 1908). The higher scores indicated that the skills were already improving.

Ironically it was the Halifax Explosion in 1917 that gave impetus to Halifax basketball. When the Mont Blanc

collided with the Imo in the Bedford Basin, it killed over two thousand people and destroyed many buildings. Among those buildings destroyed, were the ice rinks. For obvious reasons, these were among the last to be rebuilt. Probably because most gyms were in church basements, they tended to escape serious damage. When the gyms were no longer necessary for emergency hospitals, they went back into use as basketball courts. This helped make basketball the number one winter sport in the Halifax area (Evening Mail, February 1, 1920, as cited in Stephens, 1977, p.65).

None of these earliest of players were Black. The move Black athletes made from hockey to basketball in Halifax roughly coincides with the time of the Halifax Explosion; but a more definite statement cannot be made about how basketball became the most prevalent sport played by Nova Scotian Black males. There is no doubt however, that it has. The number of Nova Scotia Black men to excel in university basketball is far too large for them to be listed.

Blacks started to attend high school in numbers in the late sixties with graduation becoming the norm in the seventies. The profile of high school sport changed as a consequence. Queen Elizabeth High School, perennial Nova Scotian champions in both basketball and football, started five Black players on their men's team in the mid-seventies. The majority of starting players from this top-flight school have been Black ever since, with an average of seven or

eight Blacks on the team each year (Douglas, 1990 and Tanner, 1990).

FOOTBALL

Behind basketball in participation numbers is football, a sport which is only played in a handful of high schools. Blacks started to appear in small numbers at Queen Elizabeth High School, Halifax, in the 1960's. Before this time, believe it or not, most Nova Scotian Blacks didn't attend high school. While many in recent years have gone on to successfully play university football, the only Black Nova Scotian to go on to play professional football was Wayne Smith. As much as Blacks delighted in his success, he didn't serve as the kind of role-model educators wanted because he never attended high school.

Wayne Smith

Wayne Smith's is the Cinderella story. Never having played high school football, Smith went on to play ten years in the Canadian Football League. In 1969 he played for a sandlot team called the Halifax Buccaneers. A local coach recommended him to the Montreal Alouettes who gave him a try-out. A week later, since Montreal had not signed him, the Ottawa Rough Riders did.

In 1972, he made the All-East and then the All-Canadian teams. In 1973 Ottawa won the Grey Cup after which the Green

Bay Packers in the NFL made Smith an offer. He elected to stay in Canada, a move which was rewarded in 1974 when he was the eastern nominee for the Schenley Award; but lost out in the final voting to John Helton of Calgary.

Smith finished his ten year career playing for British Columbia, Toronto, Saskatchewan and finally, in 1983, for Hamilton (Young, 1988).

UNIVERSITY

Only eight Black Nova Scotians graduated from Nova Scotian universities before 1950. University education appeared to be unattainable to most Nova Scotian Black athletes until local coaches started recruiting them. A number of players, known as "one-year wonders", played for a season before flunking out. Most of them were American players; but there were a smattering of locals as well. Many of the local Black players dropped out for financial reasons. They nonetheless seemed to provide a necessary intermediate step to full blown university attendance.

Their one year university careers, in conjunction with the examples of some Black Americans who successfully attended and played Nova Scotian university basketball, seemed to de-mystify the possibility of the university degree. Money, of course, was a big factor. Though Canadian university tuition is highly subsidized [approximately

1/20th of the cost of comparable U.S. tuition], the cost is still prohibitive to many.

In the 1980's the Black Incentive fund began providing a means for any Black student who had managed to attain a seventy-five percent average, and gain acceptance to a university. All such students receive \$3000 for the first year, renewable in the second, contingent on grades. In the late sixties, a special "Transition Year Program" was established at Dalhousie University which provided a fully funded "preparatory" year for Black and MicMac Indian students; but very few athletes have gone through that program (Tanner, 1990).

Nova Scotian Blacks are still scarce in decision-making positions and despite community-advocacy are not the force they should be in politics (Hamilton, 1990). The number of Black students both matriculating and graduating from university however, continues to grow. There are now local Black students in both the medical schools and the law schools at Dalhousie University. Role models abound with more and more Nova Scotian Blacks succeeding athletically and professionally.

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