

Historica Canada Education Portal

Louis Cyr

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Louis Cyr biography from [The Canadians](#) series. At the end of the nineteenth century, Louis Cyr - the strong man from Canada - was arguably the best-known Canadian in the world, but an unhealthy lifestyle resulted in his early death at age 49 from overeating.

Aims

In a variety of activities, students will consider the life and accomplishments of Louis Cyr within historical context and in relationship to other athletes. Cyr's story also provides an excellent opportunity to look at the issues of fame and lifestyle.

Background

Born in 1863 to a poor farm family in St. Cyprien, Québec, Louis Cyr was widely considered to be the strongest man who ever lived. Even as a child his strength was considered exceptional. At the height of his career, he toured Europe and the US. His act included dead-lifting a platform holding 18 men (a weight of nearly 4,000 lbs) over his head, and he was

able to lift 600 pounds off the floor with one finger!

But Cyr's awesome strength had a dark side – his violent and uncontrollable temper. That and his muscles made a frightening combination, and would cost him dearly. Despite his professional success, Cyr's personal life was marred by many tragic episodes. At the peak of his career, Cyr suddenly quit and returned to Québec. There he languished in obscurity before he literally ate himself to death in 1912 at age 49.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. After viewing the Louis Cyr story, have students brainstorm in groups of 3 to 5. Instruct students to record their impressions of Louis Cyr, using single words or phrases (not sentences). Each student in the group has a piece of paper to record three or four words or ideas to describe Cyr. Then each student puts their paper in the centre of the group's working area. Each student then picks up someone else's paper and adds three new ideas. Each time a student takes a new paper from the table, he or she makes certain it is not one on which he or she has written before. Encourage the students to look for ways to "piggy back" or to build on ideas already written on the sheets. Set a limit of ten minutes for this activity.

Ask each group to look over the words and phrases on the papers produced by their group. Are there words and phrases that

express a similar idea or theme? Can a number of words and phrases be grouped together? Talk about a few examples with the students so that they understand what a theme is. Then ask the students to state, in complete sentences, any themes that have come up in their group brainstorm. Have students report the groups' themes to the class. Lead a class discussion about the themes. Post the completed sheets and themes around the room.

Ask the students to write an individual biography of Louis Cyr incorporating the themes, phrases, and words the class has generated.

2. This is a writing, designing, and drawing lesson. One way of organizing this is to form your students in small groups. Try to spread the talent for writing, designing, and drawing around so that each group has a combination of these skills. Now tell them they are an advertising company. Here are some instructions for your students:

It is 1900 and Louis Cyr is coming to your town and your job is to promote his show. How and where would you advertise? Draw up a promotion and distribution plan. Design an advertisement you want to put in the local newspaper. Will you distribute handbills or put up posters? Design a handbill or a poster. How far will you stretch the truth in order to get people interested in the Louis Cyr performance? Maybe you don't have to exaggerate at all – remember all the incredible lifts Louis actually made.

What forms and media for advertisement did not exist at the turn of the century?

3. Louis Cyr made some incredible lifts. Ask your students to make a list of Cyr's most successful lifts then suggest that they rank them in order of significance. Require the students to explain why they think their ranking

is justified.

4. In pairs (one person acting as the radio host interviewer and the other as Louis Cyr) prepare a script for a radio interview show. If time permits let the students perform the interview live in class or tape the interviews on a tape recorder and play it in class. Here are some instructions for your students:

Imagine that you are Louis Cyr and you have been asked to be on a live radio interview show. What would you like to say about yourself? What questions will the interviewer ask in order to reveal the true character and personality of Louis Cyr?

You could require the pairs of students to select a time period in Louis's life:

- Early on in his career as he is just beginning to realize his great physical strengths and he is contemplating his career.
- At the highest point of his career, he is the strongest man in the world, and has defeated all challengers.
- When his career is over. Louis Cyr is overweight and not well.

5. Louis Cyr was probably unaware of the kinds of foods he should have been eating in order to maintain his weight and strength without affecting his health. Ask your students to research this issue and to prepare a proper diet for Louis. Suggest students begin by consulting Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating.

6. Write an obituary for Louis Cyr. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](http://www.theglobeandmail.com).)

7. Research to find the names and careers of some other Canadian strongmen, such as Douglas Hepburn. How would you rank Louis Cyr against them on character as well as strength?

8. With this activity your students are called upon to decide if Louis Cyr should be inducted to a proposed Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. The tough part of the decision-making is our rule that only 5 great athletes will be accepted every year. With the class, brainstorm a list of all the great Canadian sports people, men and women, that they can come up with. Have them establish selection criteria, for example:

- must have set a world's record.
- must have achieved international recognition.
- the record they set must have endured for a long time.

Now decide if Louis Cyr will be among the first group of 5 to be inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame.

Resources

[The Canadians: Louis Cyr](#)

