Historica Canada Education Portal

The Great Teams

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos for the Edmonton Grads, Montreal Expos, Toronto Blue Jays and the World Series Championships, and the 1976 Canada Cup Team. The Edmonton Grads' astonishing record ended when they disbanded at the beginning of the Second World War. The conflict between East and West was as cold on the ice as off during the 1976 Canada Cup. The Toronto Blue Jay victory at the World Series helped to subdue ever-present concerns of American Manifest Destiny. Each of these teams has helped to represent Canada on the world stage, and in doing so, contributed to the constant evolution of Canadian identity.

Aims

To increase student awareness of the history of Canadian success in team sports; to increase student appreciation of the historical context of team competitions; to explore how Canadians have defined themselves and the nation through team sports; and, to critically investigate whether team competition is a forum for political and cultural understanding or a venue for increased cross-country animosity.

Background

When England lost to Germany in the 1990 soccer World Cup semifinal, historian Kenneth Clarke asked then-Prime Minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher, "Isn't it terrible about losing to the Germans at our national sport?" She replied, "I shouldn't worry too much; we've beaten them twice this century at theirs." This exchange speaks to the belief that sports is a less violent form of war, and that a country's history can be a story of successive conflicts with other nations.

Loyalty to country is often based on a common animosity to neighbours. Likewise, athletic teams are sometimes defined by their rivalries, and rivalries can be deeply etched in history. Whether political or sporting histories, teams find unity in the face of a common hatred. After all, sports teams are formed to defeat opponents, not for the sake of themselves. A people's loyalty to a specific team can be based on politics, place, and history. Consider international rivalries such as the infamous "Soccer War" of 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras. Or national rivalries like that between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montréal Canadiens. Rivalries can even divide a city – you're either a New York Yankees supporter or a fan of the New York Mets. This side of the border, by default, you can't be both a fan of the Edmonton Eskimos and a supporter of the Calgary Stampeders. To love one is to hate the other.

In Alberta, Calgarians driving north up Highway 2 towards Edmonton may snub their noses at a sign that sits just on the outskirts of the Alberta capital. It reads: "Edmonton, City of Champions." But the sign, despite its associations with the Oilers of the 1980s or the Eskimos of the late 1970s and early 1980s, is really meant to honour a sports dynasty that remains one of the greatest yet built in Alberta or Canada, or even in North America for that matter.

When the Edmonton Grads walked onto the basketball court between the years 1915 and 1940, it was not a good time to be a fan of their opposition. What began as a women's high-school team was to become a sporting dynasty whose winning record remains unparalleled by any team in any sport since. In their 25 year history, the Grads played 522 official games in Canada, the United States, and Europe, and recorded a record of 502 wins and 20 losses.

John Percy Page was the one and only coach of the Grads, and only 38 different women played for the team over its quarter century of dominance. As the principal of McDougall Commercial High School, Page and his assistant Bill Tate developed a "farm system" whereby girls developed their skills by working their way up through three teams until finally joining the Grads when there was an opening. Page either coached or supervised all these teams, so he assessed every player who ever wore the black-and-gold uniform of the Grads.

Page expected the same dedication from his players that he exhibited – the Edmonton schoolteacher missed only three practices throughout his career, while campaigning for a seat in the Alberta legislature. "You must play basketball, think basketball and dream basketball," he would tell his players. And they responded on the court, whether in practice or in competition.

Former Grad Helen Northup Alexander recalls, "He was there all the time, and he always expected us to be there. I broke my arm but I still went out to the practices. He told me ‘You can learn something by watching.'"

The Grads won their first Canadian title in 1923 and that same year, they competed in their first international competition against reigning American champions, the Cleveland Favorite-Knits. The crowd who gathered to

watch the two teams compete for the Underwood Trophy could easily distinguish who was who. The Favorite-Knits walked into the Edmonton Arena with the words "World Champs" written on their form fitting shorts; the Grads, on the other hand, took to the court in their usual heavy woollen stockings, knobby knee-pads and baggy knee-length bloomers. The Grads proceeded to belie the Favorite-Knits' claim, capturing the Underwood Trophy in a two-game combined score of 53-33. For 17 years, from 1923 to 1940, the Grads never relinquished the trophy, and on their 25th anniversary, the team was presented with the trophy as a permanent possession.

After dominating their sport in North America, the Grads then took on the best teams in Europe, ultimately defeating challengers in Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Berlin. Beyond these games, the Grads also dominated four consecutive Olympic Games from 1924 to 1936, winning all 27 matches they played. This achievement would unfortunately go unrecognized on the medal podium as women's basketball was not an official Olympic event during these years. In fact, it would be another 40 years before women's basketball would become an official Olympic sport.

Reflecting social stigmas associated with women's athletics, the International Olympic Committee was unwilling to acknowledge the importance of women's basketball. But the inventor of basketball, Dr. James Naismith, was not so myopic. In a letter to the Grads in 1936 he wrote, "You are not only an inspiration to basketball players throughout the world, but a model of all girls' teams. Your attitude and success have been a source of gratification to me in illustrating the possibilities of the game in the development of the highest type of womanhood."

With the onset of the Second World War, the Edmonton Grads were disbanded in 1940, just one year after the largest crowd to that date had

congregated for a basketball game in Canada. 6,792 fans gathered at the Edmonton Gardens to see, for perhaps the last time, the most dominant team in twentieth century North American sport.

On 14 April 1969, the first Major League Baseball game was played in Canada, at Montréal's Jarry Park. Former Prime Minister and lifelong baseball fan Lester Pearson was invited to throw the first pitch of what would be a Montréal Expos victory of the St. Louis Cardinals, in front of 29,184 fans.

Less than a year earlier, on 27 May 1968, the National League expansion committee announced that Montréal had been accepted as a member for the 1969 season. As National League president Warren Giles said prior to the committee decision, "If we're going to expand, let's really spread it out." Which is what they did. With Montréal's entrance into the League, the NL truly was internationalized. And this, despite the fact that the United States Congress sent a message to the League condemning their actions because they chose to locate the new team in a foreign city.

To name Montréal's new team, some looked to seventeenth century New France. But the "Voyageurs" were not to be; Expo ‘67 had just wrapped up in Montréal and as a wildly successful event, it seemed to promise great things for the future of the young franchise. And a short two weeks after the Expos opener such promise seemed to come to fruition when, on 17 April, pitcher Bill Stoneman shut out the Philadelphia Phillies to register the Expos' first no-hitter. Alas, such moments of success would be followed by low points, including a 20-game losing streak that lasted from 1 May to 8 June 1969. By October, the club would close out its first year with a 52-110 win-loss record, a winning percentage that, while brutal, seems fairly typical for new expansion teams in professional sports.

The highlight of the 1970s would come in 1973 when the Expos stayed in the NL East title hunt until the last weekend of the season. By the 1980s, the Expos developed a crop of new, young players who yielded memorable results. After moving into Montréal's new Olympic Stadium and finishing second in the NL East pennant race in both the 1979 and 1980 seasons, the Expos finally made it to the post-season in 1981. Their first opponent would be the Philadelphia Phillies in a best-of-five division series for the National League East division title. With Steve Rodgers delivering the pitching, Tim Raines stealing the bases, and catcher Gary Carter providing the power along with third baseman Larry Parrish and outfielder Andre Dawson, the Expos took the series in the fifth game on 10 October.

Nine days later, the Expos' prospects looked bright. But when the sun set on the fifth and deciding game of the NL Championship Series at Olympic Stadium, 19 October 1981 would be remembered simply as "Blue Monday." It was a classic baseball storybook ending. With the series tied at two games each, the Expos went into the ninth inning of Game 5 holding the lead. Even better, the Expos ace, Steve Rodgers, was on the mound, looking to bring the championship home to Montréal, Québec, and Canada. Los Angeles Dodgers outfielder Rick Monday stepped up to the plate, and as many Montréalers now recall, with one swing of the bat, he ended the Expos' hopes of a trip to the World Series. His home run would win the game and send the faithful home, hoping for better next year. Unfortunately, these sorts of disappointments would be repeated, most memorably a little more than a decade later when Expo players and fans would be left to dream about what-might-have-been.

On 12 August 1994 Major League Baseball players went on strike and ended the season prematurely, a season in which Felipe Alou had

managed the Expos to their best record. The strike erased the rest of the schedule and forced the cancellation of the 1994 World Series. Even more damaging, however, the Expos were counting on a successful playoff run to offset the financial difficulties the team faced off the field. But when the playoffs failed to materialize, the team's money woes only worsened. By 1995, the Expos' future as a financially viable baseball team was in doubt.

Regrettably, the Expos would never again get as close as that "Blue Monday" to the Fall Classic. Throughout the 1990s, the team continued to develop promising young talent only to see these players move (either through trades or free agent signings) to larger and more lucrative baseball markets once they became stars. By the turn of the twenty-first century, baseball was on its last legs in Montréal; in 2004, the team was moved to Washington, D.C., and renamed the Nationals.

If the history of the Expos is about hopes dashed through circumstances both on the field and off, Canada's other Major League team has managed to overcome the difficulties of expansion to build an organization that reached the pinnacle of their sport, not once but twice. In the same year that the Expos moved into Olympic Stadium, Major League Baseball welcomed another Canadian onto its roster. At Exhibition Stadium, 44,649 fans braved snow and freezing temperatures on 7 April 1977 to witness the hometown Toronto Blue Jays defeat the Chicago White Sox 9-5. For the next fifteen years, Hog Town was home to the American League East champions three times; the third in 1991, when the Jays became the first team in baseball history to draw more than 4,000,000 fans over the course of a single season.

But history would truly and sweetly be made the following year. In 1992, the Jays made it to the finals to face the Atlanta Braves in baseball's first

international World Series. Game one in Dixie was won by Atlanta, but is perhaps best remembered because Canada's flag was flown upside down as fans stood at the start of the game for our national anthem. With this miscue behind them, the Jays would win the next three games before Atlanta bounced back for a win in game five. Game six went back to Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, where history would be made. On 24 October 1992, more than half a million people poured into the streets of Toronto in a world-class frenzy as the Jays won the Championship with a 4-3 victory.

Jump ahead one year less a day, to Game Six of the 1993 World Series and again the Jays were in tough. This time they faced the Philadelphia Phillies who were protecting a one run lead in the ninth inning. With the Jays up 3-2 in the Series, the Phillies called on their closer, Mitch "the Wild Thing" Williams, to end the game and send it back to Philadelphia. Williams intentionally walked the first batter, Rickey Henderson, on four pitches. The next batter, Devon White, hit a fly out to left field before designated hitter Paul Molitor hit a clutch single to centre. This set the stage for Joe Carter.

One of the leading stars on the team at the time, Carter had been having an off-season to that point. However, in the bottom of the ninth, Carter worked the count to 2 balls and 2 strikes. With the next pitch, Carter entered baseball history as only the second player to hit a home run to win the World Series title. Running around the bases like a boy who had just hit his first T-ball homer, Carter's hit made the final score 8-6. Meanwhile, across this nation, the real score was now Canada 2, United States 0. The Fall Classic was once more ours.

As the autumn season is followed by winter, in Canada at least, the baseball season cedes the athletic battlefield to the game of hockey.

Beginning in 1976, however, this shift in sport has taken on a special dimension. While the 1972 Summit Series between Canada and the Soviet Union will always hold a special place in the memories of Canadians, the Canada Cup was really the first international hockey tournament that brought together the best professionals in the sport to compete for hockey supremacy.

On 3 September 1976, Soviet citizens watched their national team play the defending world champions from Czechoslovakia on Soviet State Television. And on that night at the Montréal Forum, prior to the puck being dropped, Roger Doucet, who sang O Canada for many years at Canadiens' home games, inaugurated the lyrics to the Soviet national anthem. The words to the Hymn of the Soviet Union had been quietly dropped after 1956 because they contained too many references to the late Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Not to be left speechless for the anthem, Doucet unearthed a copy of the old lyrics and took them to the Russian Department at the Université de Montréal and asked them to "fix them up." These were the lyrics he sang that September evening, and in 1977 (with no credit to Doucet or the Université de Montréal), the Soviet Parliament officially adopted the new words.

In 1976, the first half of the month of September brought together the world's major hockey powers – Canada, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Soviet Union, Sweden and the United States. The Canadian team were the heavy favourites, with coach Scotty Bowman icing sixteen future Hall of Famers including Bobby Orr, Bobby Hull, Phil Esposito, Guy Lafleur, and Darryl Sittler, not to mention a defense that included the Montréal Canadiens' "Big Three" of Serge Savard, Guy Lapointe and Larry Robinson. Gerry Cheevers stood between the pipes and Don Cherry stood beside Bowman as assistant coach.

Throughout the tournament, Canada's biggest challenge came from Czechoslovakia, largely because the Soviets had left several established national team players at home. During the round robin competition, Canada was given a bit of 1972 Summit Series déjà vue in the visage of Czech goaltender Vladimir Dzurilla (Vladislav Tretiak) who helped the Czechs to a 1-0 victory.

Days later the two teams met again in the best-of-three final. With memories of Dzurilla stoning them in the round robin, the Canadians came out strong in Game 1 en route to a 6-0 win.

In Game 2 in Montréal, Dzurilla kept Czechoslovakia competitive, forcing the game into overtime with the teams tied at four goals apiece. At 11:33 of the first extra period, however, the goaltender was beaten after Toronto Maple Leaf captain Darryl Sittler broke off the left wing and – following advice from assistant coach Don Cherry – feinted a slap shot causing Dzurilla to fall to his knees. Sittler skated by and scooped the puck into the open net. Canada won the game 5-4 to capture the first-ever Canada Cup. There would be five more, with Canada winning four and coming in second to the Soviets in 1981. While these competitions remain firmly embedded in Canadian history, the Canada Cup itself was discontinued in 1996 to be replaced by the World Cup of Hockey.

In a story that now lends itself to Tim Horton's donut commercials as much as to history, the Salt Lake Organizing Committee hired Edmonton ice maker Trent Evans to tend the ice during the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games. On 4 February 2002, he noticed that the Olympic logo surrounding centre ice did not have a dot to mark the middle. After initially placing a dime to mark the spot, Evans returned the next day with a loonie. And despite an order to remove the Canadian currency by event organisers, he camouflaged the spot with gold paint.

When game time came on 24 February the loonie remained, and the Canadian team was determined to rub out exactly 50 years of gold drought in Olympic hockey. Half a century ago to the day at the 1952 Oslo Olympics, an amateur team called the Edmonton Waterloo Mercurys won Canada's last Olympic hockey gold. Since then, the Cold War had thawed and the once icy relationship between teams from the East and West is no more. In its place, Canadians have transferred their icy stares towards their southern neighbours.

So when Jarome Iginla and Joe Sakic each scored twice in a 5-2 victory that Sunday in Utah, goaltender Martin Brodeur's observation is telling: "We're a hockey power in the world. Winning the gold kind of reassures Canada." Defenseman Al MacInnis was fully aware of the importance of the game to Canadians' sense of self: "No other team had more pressure than ours. Everybody in Canada was watching with the same intensity that we played the game with. It's amazing the way a sport can bring the country together."

Ten and a half million viewers watched the gold medal victory, the largest recorded television audience in the nation's history. That is half a million more Canadians than watched Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon on 20 July 1969, and about the entire population of the country in 1932. (The game easily shattered the previous Canadian audience record of 6.7 million. That mark was set during another historic Canadian-American sporting clash, the Toronto Blue Jays' extra-innings win over the Atlanta Braves in Game 6 of the 1992 World Series.)

The game and the loonie are now part of not only the history of hockey, but of the nation's history. On 4 August 2004, the Royal Canadian Mint officially unveiled the nation's newest circulation coin – the "Lucky

Loonie." In less than three years, Trent Evans one-dollar coin has spawned imitators, all talismans for Canadian sporting success. In the end such talismans may not work every time, but on that February evening in 2002, it was golden.

Activities

1. Making the Team, or Making the Buck?

Newspaper articles and radio reports regularly reported the exploits of the Edmonton Grads. But the true mark of their celebrity status in Edmonton and elsewhere was that the team was merchandised. In the 1930s, official Grads record books and Christmas postcards could be purchased.

Of course, since then the commercialization of sports teams has ballooned. Indeed, today franchises regularly rework the insignia and look of their team in order to increase revenues. Some schools have also jumped into the game, eager to accept money from corporations in return for using the company's logo on their jerseys or gymnasium walls. The addition of this branding can mean additional costs for students and players though who have to purchase their uniforms. When many students already struggle to afford the costs associated with sports, is it worth the addition of corporate branding?

In groups of two or three, students are to produce a campaign either supporting or opposing the corporate sponsorship of their school teams. The campaign should include the following:

- Poster

- A 100-word letter to the editor of the school newspaper
- A five minute speech to be delivered to the student body
- A proposal for a new design for the school's emblem (either incorporating or not using the image of the corporate sponsor)

2. Harmony, or Hatred?

In 1941, with war waging and Britain contemplating a grim future, George Orwell wrote: "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play; it is bound up with hatred and jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all the rules and sadistic pleasure in unnecessary violence. In other words, it is war minus the shooting." Is Orwell exaggerating the violence of sport and ignoring its ability to bring people and nations together? Or is it idealistic to claim that athletics can overcome political and cultural animosity?

In groups of two or three, students are to plot athletic contests of the twentieth century that either provide evidence to support Orwell's observation or oppose his claims. Groups should identify at least ten events and then place each on a scale of –5 to +5. The more the sporting contest brings people together, the greater it approaches +5; the greater the animosity the competition creates, the closer it approaches –5. Each event is accompanied by a 100-word explanation of why it is located where it is on the graph.

3. Cartooning Canada

Charlie Brown standing at the pitching mound just prior to being bowled over by a line drive hit is part of the story of baseball in America. Part of what makes Charles Schultz's character appealing is his lack of ability, his failure to be heroic on the playing field, and how he overanalyzes the game and life.

Students are to create their own cartoon strip based on the story of hockey in Canada. More than a simple laugh, the strip should incorporate humour that speaks to the unique place hockey has in the nation's psyche. As part of their strip, each student is to provide the following:

- A list of characters with a brief biography of each.
- A 100-word essay explaining the goals of the comic strip. To whom is it speaking? What comment is it trying to make about hockey, but more importantly, about Canada?
- An example of the comic strip.

4. Lights, Camera, Action!

Baseball lends itself to film in a way that few other sports do.The Natural (1984), Eight Men Out (1988), Bull Durham (1988) and Field of Dreams (1989) are a only few of the movies that have contributed to the mythology of the game. Perhaps because baseball is America's pastime, Hollywood has been more successful with baseball than with most other sports.

This is the chance for students to imagine a film that helps mythologize the game of women's hockey. Though the Canadian Men's team erased a fifty-year drought in Utah, the Canadian women's team erased an eight-game loosing streak to the United States to win when it mattered most in Salt Lake in 2002. Though there have been fewer films about women and sport, A League of Their Own (1992) is based in historical reality. The Second World War is beginning. Most of the baseball players are being drafted. In an attempt to save the sport, several owners formed the All American Girls Baseball League.

In groups of two or three, students are to write a plot outline for a film about either the Edmonton Grads or the 2002 Women's Olympic Team. Other possibilities include the Canadian Women's Soccer team under Christine Sinclair, or a choice of the students, approved by the teacher. Though the film should be solidly based in history and be honest to how each team fared, groups can fictionalize some of the events to help mythologize each team in the minds of Canadians. That is, write the outline to a film that speaks to how Canadians see themselves.

5. Remembering the Game

Part of our oral history is the remembrances of team sport competitions. Historically, in literature and in films, sport has been used as a way to strengthen the relationship between parent/guardian and child as a shared experience and team loyalty and rivalries are frequently handed down from generation to generation.

Students are to investigate the impact of a sporting team on prior generations through an oral history exercise. They will interview a parent, grandparent, or other older relative about attending a team sport with a relative or friend. Each student should act as a historian, collecting oral history information from relatives and/or neighbours who have recollections of attending games as children. Possible guiding questions for the interview can be found below.
As a class, discuss how watching a sporting event has affected their lives. Why was the experience particularly memorable? How much of the game is remembered?

Once students have conducted their interview, each is to present their findings to the class. Finally, students are to write a 250-word short story

about a fictional game and how it served as a way for different generations (daughter and mother, uncle and niece, for example) to better understand each other.

Interview Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What was he first team sports game you attended? What year was it? What teams played? How old were you?
4. Where was the game played?
5. Which team won the game? Do you remember the score?
6. Who did you attend the game with?
7. What are some of your favourite recollections about seeing this game?
8. Do you feel that going to this game was an important event in your life? Please explain your answer.
9. Are there any other things you would like to add about the game or what you remember about the day?

Resources

Footprint Videos

Edmonton Grads

Montreal Expos

Toronto Blue Jays and the World Series Championships

1976 Canada Cup Team

The Canadian Encyclopedia

Toronto Blue Jays

Canadians in Baseball

Montréal Expos
Edmonton Grads
Canada Cup (World Cup of Hockey)

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