Historica Canada Education Portal

Heroes

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprints videos for Lionel Conacher, Harry Jerome and Wayne Gretzky. Heroes are not made; they are born, and Canada has its own distinct breed. The athletes in this series are national heroes, not so much for how they transformed their respective sports (great athleticism is not synonymous with heroism), but for how they reshaped the Canadian landscape from a disjointed collection of communities into a people with a common history and mythology. They all ask us to be part of something larger than ourselves.

Aims

To increase student awareness of Canadian athletes as heroes and agents of change; to learn how they have demonstrated their resolve in national and international arenas; to understand the challenges each of these Canadians faced in pursing their goals; to analyse how Canadians understand national heroes; to examine how national sports idols change according to time and place; and to seek a connection between national ideals and a country's idols.

Background

The greatest conquerors knew that if you took away a culture's heroes, you have, in essence, conquered them. To choose our own heroes, free of interference or coercion, is a sign of personal and national democracy. Canadians have generally been able to choose their own heroes, and whom we have chosen to remember tells us about who we are and who we were. The following three athletes are heroes by any definition; their historic context reflects the values and ideals of the nation through the prism of sport.

Lionel Pretoria Conacher was raised in the north-end of Toronto at 92 Davenport Road in an area called Cottingham Square, which was once described as "one of Toronto's higher class slums." Born on 24 May 1900, Lionel was the oldest boy in a family of ten, raised on a teamster's salary. Coming of age during the years of the Great War, this was a time of significant change both in global politics and North American sport.

Ted Reeve, a contemporary of Conacher's, once wrote that "every kid in Cottingham Square...played lacrosse, rugby and hockey, and you had to fight or move." Conacher quickly realized that he could do both, and more importantly, that he could move away from Davenport Road by excelling as an athlete. And so excel he did. Whether it was hockey, baseball, rugby, football, wrestling, or boxing, Conacher was successful in just about every sport he tried. At 16, for instance, he won the Ontario 61-kilogram wrestling championship; at 20, he won the Canadian light-heavyweight boxing title.

During these early years, Canada, like Conacher, was coming of age, especially following the First World War. Industrialism was altering the patterns of life and leisure time was increasing. While the influence of British culture continued, American influences were beginning to play a larger role. This was especially evident in the field of sports where American conceptions of professionalism and sport as entertainment were taking effect. On another front, the exclusivity of horse racing, cricket, and rowing were being challenged by what were seen as more egalitarian sports like lacrosse, football, baseball, and hockey.

In the end, given his family's economic background, Conacher gravitated to those sports that provided him with his equipment and a chance to get paid. Hockey was one sport in Canada where payment for services rendered was possible and so, at the advanced age of 16, Conacher learned to skate. Later, he would say:

> "The average kid starts skating at the age of seven or younger. I laced on skates for the first time at the age of 16, and you'll never know the humiliation and utter weariness of the long hours which I spent on rinks with younger and much more skilled players before I won a post in junior circles."

The First World War would throw the entire hockey establishment into disarray, but near the end of the conflict, on 19 December 1917 the first game in the National Hockey League was held. For the 1920-21 season, the Toronto St. Pats, a forerunner of the Maple Leafs, enticed Conacher with a $3,000 contract - about three times the average NHL salary at the

time - and added a $500 cash bonus as another carrot. But Conacher, always wary of putting food on his family's table, turned it down. Instead, he arranged a job with the Toronto-Dominion Bank, which allowed Conacher to play for various amateur teams (for various sports) and bring in a steady income from a good job in the period of high unemployment following the First World War.

By 1919, Lionel Conacher was recognized by many as the best all-round athlete in Toronto. Fans delighted in his play and sportswriters relished the chance to assign yet another moniker to the phenomenon: The Blond Express, Iron Man, Athletic Superman, The Human Dynamo, The Big Moose, and The Muscular Mohican were just some of the names hurled his way. Ultimately, the name that stuck was the "Big Train."

By 1921, the 1.83 metre, 91 kilogram Conacher had steamed his way into the national consciousness. It was the first east-west meeting for Canadian football's Earl Grey trophy, and the Edmonton Eskimos, representing the west, were up against the Toronto Argonauts. When the Argonauts had to play the Parkdale Canoe Club for the right to meet the west, Edmonton coach Deacon White scouted the game and submitted this appraisal of Conacher: "The teams would have been evenly matched had Conacher not been playing with the Argos." In the game for Earl Grey's trophy, Toronto defeated Edmonton 23-0. Conacher scored 15 points and then left the game after the third quarter to play hockey that evening for his Aura Lee team of the Ontario Hockey Association.

The teams, associations, organizations, and leagues that benefited from Conacher's talents cover the alphabet of professional sports in North America. And Conacher had the scars to illustrate his time with each league. Prior to his retirement, he wrote an article in *Maclean's* Magazine recounting the physical cost he endured throughout his career, which

included: eight broken noses (so many there were suggestions he put it on a hinge), a broken arm and leg, several broken bones in his hands, 10 cracked ribs, skate gashes across the jugular vein, a cut on the thigh that led to gangrene, two knee cartilage operations, 650 stitches, and an untold number of "minor" injuries.

His career also highlights the nationalistic growing pains felt by Canadians. The greenback to the south was luring away homegrown talent. Pittsburgh papers proudly proclaimed in 1923 that "Canada's Premier Athlete" would be theirs when he signed a contract with the Pittsburgh Yellow Jackets of the United States Amateur Hockey Association. A Toronto newspaper lamented that the American gain of the "Superman of Canada [was] one of the Yankees' greatest victories since the War of Independence." The city's reporters gushed with hyperbole:

> Weighted down by the responsibility and the knowledge that victory must come now or never, Conacher, like Hector of old, like Thor, the thundergod of Viking saga, bore up 'neath all to smite the enemy with a crashing blow.... Thrice did Lionel crack asunder that steely cordon Cleveland throws about her goal...and thrice did 6,000 fans rise up in roaring tribute to the man who in four brief months had become their idol.

The exploits of Conacher are true and legendary. On one occasion in 1922, Conacher came to bat in the bottom of the ninth; his Toronto Hillcrest baseball team was down by one run with the bases loaded. Conacher hit a double to centre field to win the game and the Ontario baseball championship. A taxi was called to take the "Big Train" across

town to Scarborough Beach. His Maitland lacrosse team was behind 3-0 when he arrived. Four goals and an assist later Maitland won the championship game 5-3. And that same year, when Jack Dempsey came to town for a four round exhibition match, Conacher stepped into the ring with the heavyweight champ and, while he didn't win, by his own admission, he got his punches in.

Not surprisingly, by 1930 the hyperactivity began to take its toll the all-sporting champ. Conacher had been drinking freely, so much so in fact that his brother, Charley Conacher, observed that Lionel seemed "bent on a literal interpretation of the soft drink slogan, 'Drink Canada Dry'." His play suffered, and teams noted his decline.

In the end, Conacher was fallible and he knew it. This fallibility is what finally makes him human and, consequently, even more of a heroic figure. With his career and income on the line, and a new daughter born on 25 November 1930, Conacher promised his wife at Toronto's Wellesley Hospital he would change. He called 1930 his "hardest battle as an athlete," filling his days with soft drinks, pots of tea, pipe smoking, golf, and movies to remove the temptation of the bottle. The light at the end of the tunnel approached.

Late in 1930 the "Big Train" emerged victorious. Over the next seven years Conacher continued his winning form - top scorer in the new professional lacrosse league; NHL all-star team for the 1932/33 season; and Stanley Cup wins in 1934 (with Chicago) and again in 1935 (with Montréal). With his best athletic years behind him, Conacher retired in 1937 but never really slowed down. Instead, he turned to politics and won the Toronto riding of Trinity in the 1949 federal election and again in 1953.

On 26 May 1954, at the annual softball game between Members of Parliament and the press gallery, Conacher hit the ball into left field and tried to stretch a single into a triple. He did in fact reach third base on the play. But a few seconds later, he collapsed. Twenty minutes after that, he was pronounced dead of a heart attack.

Both Lionel Conacher's play and his life were heroic. He may not have made it home that spring day in Ottawa, but the "Big Train" led a life that few writers would dare pass off as fact.

Harry Jerome was named after his father, a train porter. Born on 30 September 1940, he moved to North Vancouver with his family when he was twelve. They settled in a conservative neighbourhood, whose black population numbered exactly seven - Jerome, his four siblings and his mother and father. Jerome caught the attention of a track coach at North Vancouver High School as he ran the bases in a baseball game.

On 15 July 1960, running at a meet in Saskatoon for the University of Oregon, Jerome set the world record of 10.0 seconds in the 100 metres. This result seemed the beginning of great triumphs to come. In 1962, however, during the Commonwealth Games in Perth Australia, Jerome completely severed his left quadriceps muscle, a devastating injury that left a 30-centimetre scar on his thigh. That he made it to the Tokyo Games in 1964 was testament to his will and determination. The bronze medal he left with was just the icing on the cake.

It's surprising that all his success and doggedness on the track did not ingratiate Jerome to Canada's media. Perhaps, in part, this was because he consistently questioned the country's attitudes about race. He was a voice for social change and a vocal opponent of the misrepresentation or absence of African Canadians in the Canadian media.

In 1968, Jerome retired from active competition while still running some of the best times of his career. Continuing his dedication to education, he worked to encourage sport and fitness at the elementary school level. This work continued over two decades and came to an all-too-early end on 7 December 1982 when, riding across Vancouver's Lion's Gate Bridge, Jerome suffered a brain seizure and died on the way to hospital. Today, Jerome remains a monument to heroism and a role model for all.

Walter Gretzky didn't flood his backyard intending to build a hockey star; he did it so he could watch his children skate from the warmth of his kitchen. It became a community skating rink, but as Walter's son Wayne later observed: "I don't remember picking up the phone and calling a lot of guys to come over and play games. I got more enjoyment out of shooting pucks and stickhandling by myself." Walter argued with his son about his late nights out back, but it didn't change anything. When the sun went down and darkness set in, Gretzky just played closer to the net, working magic with the puck.

The national spotlight found Gretzky in 1971-72 when Canadian Press called the then 10-year old: "a four-foot-four, 78-pound dynamo." The nation's media and the country as a whole has continued to follow Gretzky as his life has unfolded. We had to buy new NHL record books every year as he rewrote them with his poetry on ice. Kids began to wear hockey jerseys just so, in the hope that the Great One's fashion would translate into our skill. His departure from Canada to play in Los Angeles made us weep. A member of Parliament spoke for most Canadians when he called Gretzky a "national symbol, like the beaver. How can we allow the sale of our national symbols?" We asked ourselves, is Canada still Canada without number 99? And then we learned to take ourselves just a little bit less seriously, but with more confidence.

Gretzky changed the nature of his sport. Consider the words of Victor Tikhonov, the legendary coach of the Soviet national team,"When he gets the puck behind the net...it is almost as though the entire game is being transferred from every other part of the ice to that place. And then it becomes a new game, and Gretzky invented it."

So Gretzky is more than the Stanley Cups, the passes made, the goals scored. He is the creator of a new sport, and in a country where the game has almost religious importance, his contribution to hockey is transcendent.

Heroes can be found in the daily life. The question is not whether we need to or should have heroes. The question is what kind of heroes should we embrace? As Canada navigates the next century, the heroes we embrace will change because in the face of our heroes, we find ourselves.

Activities

1. What is a hero? A sandwich?

In ancient Greece there was a saying that read (in Italian), "Dicami che andate con e vi dirò che siete." Translated literally, it says, "Tell me whom you admire and I'll tell you who you are." There are three common themes in heroic mythology:

- Abandonment: Hero is cast away from family due to tragic circumstances
- Fate/Destiny: Hero grows up ignorant of identity but learns of true origin
- Emergent Savior: Hero faces incredible odds to become the unlikely savior

The last is the character we usually associate with sports heroes, and it certainly applies to the three athletes looked at in this series. The heroes we embrace as individuals may tell us about ourselves, and if the logic holds, the heroes we embrace as a society may tell us about who we are as a nation. Additionally, the heroes embraced by a country speak to the values and ideals most prominent in a particular era.

If our definition of heroism changes over time, would Lionel Conacher, Harry Jerome and Wayne Gretzky still be considered heroes today? Students are to select a Canadian athlete who was considered a hero in their specific era. In a diagram resembling a hero sandwich, each student is to identify the essential characteristics of their selected athlete that make him or her a hero for all time - traits that would be considered heroic in any age. These qualities comprise the "bread" of their sandwich. The ingredients of their sandwich indicate the qualities of their athlete that were specific to them and their era; that is, those traits that made them heroic for their time in history. Ideally, as students move towards the centre of their sandwich, the historical and personal context should become more specific.

2. Olympian Heroes and Zeroes

The Olympics are a showcase of heartache, Herculean athleticism, and heroism. Every two years, the world is witness to the ideals of athletic

achievement. As United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in a message prior to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, "Olympic ideals are also United Nations ideals: tolerance, equality, fair play and, most of all, peace." But like the United Nations, the Olympiad has been a forum in which the frailties and failings of humans are writ large. Consider the ecstasy Canadians felt when Ben Johnson beat American rival Carl Lewis and the rest of the field in the final of the 100m at the 1988 Seoul, South Korea Olympics, and the agony that befell the nation when days later, he was stripped of his gold medal after testing positive for the banned steroid stanozolal.

There is also the story of the Montréal policeman who, at the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis, Etienne Desmarteau went from zero to hero in a matter of days. Desmarteau was a Montréal policeman who also threw the 56-pound (25.4 kilogram) weight. He asked his employers for time off to attend the Olympic competitions in 1904, and was not only turned down, but the 1.85 metre, 100-kilogram cop was fired. He received assistance from the MAA (Montréal Athletic Association), beat all the competitors to win the gold medal and returned a conquering hero. He also returned home as a reinstated policeman. Sadly, Desmarteau died of typhoid a year later. At the time, he was credited as Canada's first Olympic gold medalist.

Students are to locate a Canadians athlete who, as a result of their exploits at an Olympic Games, either went from hero to zero or from zero to hero. After researching their chosen athlete, students are to write a 250-word essay about the athlete. The piece should either mourn the loss of a hero or laud the creation of a new one. Students should consider the historical and cultural context of their chosen Olympian as well as the political context of the Games.

3. Phil who?

Distribute the following information about middle-distance runner Phil Edwards. In groups of two or three, students are to produce a campaign to educate Canadians about Phil Edwards. How can the nation recognize the accomplishments of Edwards as an athlete, doctor and representative for racial equality? The campaign must be accessible to all Canadians. Examples may include a cross-Canada relay held every four-years in recognition of Edwards and Canada's multi-cultural heritage. Perhaps a monument is deemed appropriate.

Phil Edwards won more medals than any other Canadian Summer Olympian. Dubbed the "man of bronze," the British Guyana-born Edwards raced his way to fame and the Olympic medal podium five times for his adopted country. But he is largely unknown today.

Edwards came to Canada with his family in the 1920s, and even though his family came from an economically privileged background, they had to deal with the racial discrimination practices against blacks people in the Canadian society of the time. Black people in Canada, less than one percent of the population, could expect employment as railway porters for men and house cleaners for women.

But Edward had ambitions beyond the railroad - to compete in the Olympics and become a doctor. Wearing the Maple Leaf on his chest, Edwards compiled an unmatched competitive record, competing in three straight Olympics. When he raced in his first Olympics in 1928 in Amsterdam, he was an outsider on the Canadian team. But by the time he and the Canadian team left for Berlin in July 1936 aboard the steamship Duchess of Bedford, his character and athletic achievements had earned him not only the respect but the captaincy of Canada's 1936

team.

Edwards' finished the Berlin Olympics with his fifth and last bronze, but leaving the city limits of Berlin did not remove him from the racial theories of the host German Nazis. On the way home, Edwards was refused entry to an exclusive Canadian-owned London hotel. Other patrons were raising a fuss because they were uncomfortable with the thought of staying in the same hotel as a black man.

Outraged, the more than 50 Canadian athletes who had already checked in immediately packed their bags and left in search of a more accommodating accommodation. Few expressed the collective opinion of the team better than Cathleen Hughes-Hallett, a female fencer. When this little episode happened at the hotel she said, "If this hotel is too good for Phil Edwards, it's too good for me."

He graduated from McGill medical school in 1936, and received a graduate diploma in medicine in 1945, specializing in tropical diseases. He also served as a captain with the Canadian army in the Second World War. Edwards became an expert in tropical diseases, putting that expertise to use on a number of international medical missions.

At the age of 64, Edwards died due to heart problems in Montréal on 6 September 1971. Shortly afterwards, the "Phil Edwards Memorial Trophy" was established to be presented annually to Canada's most outstanding track athlete. However, it took more than a quarter century for his election into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame, and only after a vigourous campaign led by James Worral, the flag bearer for Canada in the 1936 opening Ceremonies in Berlin.

An Olympic teammate, Ray Lewis, says Edwards is a hero for more than

the bronze medals hanging from his neck: "He was one of the greatest that ever ran for Canada. To make three Olympics, '28, '32 and '36. And bring home five bronze medals. Forget about going for the gold, but he was competing. And anytime anybody competes that successfully for 8 years, '28 to '36, you've got to be good."

4. Triptych an athlete

A triptych is a painting or carving consisting of three panels, often made as an altarpiece hinged together so that when the smaller outer panels are folded the middle part is entirely covered. This was a common art form in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and a way to show veneration for religious figures such as Jesus Christ, the Apostles and Saints. Either individually or in groups of three, students are to construct their own triptych to express the deeds and characteristics of a Canadian sports figure. The images must help explain why their selected athlete is a hero. Optionally, the drawings could be historically contextual. For example, an athlete from the 1920s may be illustrated in the Art Deco style popular during the era.

Resources

Footprint Videos
Wayne Gretzky
Lionel Conacher

The Canadian Encyclopedia
Wayne Gretzky

Harry Jerome
Lionel Conacher

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