# Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

## The Originals - Character and Distinction

**Overview**

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos Torchy Peden, Whipper Billy Watson, Jack Kent Cooke, Northern Dancer, Sandy Hawley, The Calgary Stampede, Jack Bionda, Jimmy McLarnin, and George Chuvalo. Their names do not suggest athletic prowess: Washerwoman, Northern Dancer, The Baby-faced Assassin, Whipper, the unwealthiest millionaire, Torchy, Cowtown Stampede. But the moniker of these athletes and one sporting event are characteristically Canadian — apparent feebleness conceals a humble strength in which Canadians take pride. This delight in the dark horse is best echoed by one of our originals, George Chuvalo. After a marathon fifteen-round boxing match with then-heavyweight champ, Muhammad Ali, Chuvalo remarked through swollen lips, "He never hurt me. I'd like another crack at him."

*Trigger Warning: This contains racial slurs of Indigenous people for educational purposes.

**Aims**

To increase student awareness of Canadian athletes as innovators; to learn how they have demonstrated their athleticism on national and

international stages; to understand the challenges each of these Canadians faced in pursuing their goals; to look at the historical and social context of athletic competition; to question the representation of Canada's First Nations Peoples in sporting events; and, to explore acceptable associations between the pursuit of athletic excellence and ethnic nationalism.

**Background**

The entertainment tastes of Canadians through the Dirty Thirties reflected the nation's determination to endure the worst of the Depression. In the depths of the Dust Bowl, the exuberant dance steps of the Charleston, which was popularized during the Roaring Twenties, did not reflect the mood of the nation. Instead, in the spirit of the economic hard times, young people danced for dollars in marathons of sheer stamina. The goal was simple — remain on the dance floor with your partner the longest and win the cash prize. The longest such competition lasted 22 weeks, 3 1/2 days — no wonder the New York World newspaper noted: "Of all the crazy competitions ever invented, the dancing marathon wins by a considerable margin of lunacy." Perhaps if the newspaper knew of Canadian marathon cyclist, **W.J. "Torchy" Pedan**, it would have considered his feats a close second.

Pedan was the king of seated cycling marathons, a sport that was popular in the years before the Second World War and which has now largely faded from memory. The 1.9 metre 100-kilogram native of Victoria mesmerized (and sometimes anesthetized) throngs of people in arenas across North America. Usually beginning on a Sunday night and concluding at midnight the following Saturday, the races were comprised of two-man teams zipping around a course at 80 kilometres per hour.

Before the era of the energy bar, Pedan concocted his own endurance elixirs to fortify his strength for competition. During the race he would graze on a chunk of round steak ground with a dozen egg yolks, well salted, and eaten between two slices of whole-wheat bread.

With the ever-elusive dollar on the line, rivalries often led to fisticuffs. And though Pedan avoided serious injury, he suffered "a few broken ribs, a broken collarbone, a few small bones in my hands and feet and that's about all...Oh yeah, I lost a lot of teeth." By the eve of the Second World War, the marathon-racing fad was fading. Following the war, Pedan tried to revive the six-day whirlwind marathons, but the times and people's entertainment tastes had moved on.

Today, few might imagine that wrestling also once seemed destined for the dustbin of history, but in the first half of the twentieth century, wrestling had a much lower profile in Canada than it does today. If not for the exploits of another Canadian original, **Whipper Billy Watson**, it might not have achieved the fame it did in the years before the likes of today's World Wrestling Entertainment.

Born William John Potts in East York, Ontario, on 25 June 1915, Potts was the son of a soldier killed in France near the end of the First World War. In 1935, the 20-year-old Potts, weighing 79.4 kilograms, decided to leave Canada to pursue a wrestling career in Europe. Over the next four years, Potts changed his name to Whipper Billy Watson as he mastered his sport and achieved fame and a tidy fortune on the European wrestling circuit. By 1939, with the Second World War on the horizon, he returned to Canada with a nickname, a reputation, a bankroll, a wife, and 18.1 extra kilograms on his 1.85 metre frame.

Over the next 31 years and some 6,500 bouts, Watson would thrill

audiences with his arsenal of wrestling holds and moves, including the move that gave him his nickname. His natural talent combined with his public popularity resulted in several Canadian and World Heavyweight title reigns, as well as one of the most successful — and respected — careers in the history of the sport. One of the reasons Watson was so popular among fans is that he openly embraced the "good guy" role and also extended his large arms to support various children's charities such as the Easter Seals. By 1944, Maclean's magazine had taken to describing Watson as a real-life superhero: "Watson is as handsome as Robert Taylor, as powerful as the SS Queen Mary and as persistent and uncompromising as Dick Tracy in his efforts to exterminate evil.... He is a paragon of virtue in the ring... and the customers love him to pieces."

Such exploits would continue until 30 November 1971, when, while stopped on an icy road, a car slammed into Watson, leaving his left knee shattered and his leg nearly severed. The Whipper was forced to retire from the ring, but he spent the next 20 years using his name to work tirelessly for children's charities. On 4 February 1990 William "Whipper Watson" Potts died at the age of 74 after suffering a heart attack.

The poverty of the Depression that prompted Pedan and Watson to seek their fortune in unique pursuits in Canada and abroad also forced the 22-year old **Jack Kent Cooke** to sell encyclopedias across the country to earn money in difficult financial times. He began his road trip from his humble home in Hamilton, Ontario, and eventually became the "unwealthiest millionaire" in America's capital.

Born 25 October 1912, Cooke was an avid Canadian sportsfan. But as a man who came to exemplify excessiveness,  it was the sporting world south of the 49th parallel that offered the kind of excitement and glamour Cooke wanted to attain.

By 1951, he had made his first fortune in the television industry, which allowed Cooke to make his first venture into the sports business, the Maple Leafs Triple A baseball team. In 1960, Cooke moved to California and proceeded to rack up a series of triumphs in Hollywood, adding to his fame and fortune.

In 1965, Cooke's sporting interests really took off when he bought the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers for $5.2 million, a very significant amount at the time. With Jack Nicholson and other Hollywood devotees cheering from their courtside seats, Cooke would help bring about the era of "Showtime" to Los Angeles basketball by signing such greats as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson. In 1966, Cooke also acquired the Los Angeles Kings, which were a new expansion franchise in the NHL at the time. In 1968, he built the "fabulous" Great Western Forum to house his teams.

By 1974, football had caught Cooke's eye; he became majority owner of the Washington Redskins of the NFL. In 1978, he would finally move to the Washington area and, as a result, sold his stake in the Lakers and the Kings the following year for $67.5 million, then, the largest business transaction in sports history.

Cooke's personal life was nearly as flamboyant as his sports teams. In 1978, for instance, Cooke entered the Guinness Book of World Records when his first divorce settlement reached the then-unheard of sum of $49 million. Three subsequent marriages would follow and each seemed to bring Cooke's personal life back into the headlines.

Meanwhile, on the field, Cooke's Washington Redskins won Super Bowls XVII, XXII and XXVI. Such successes would come as Cooke himself was

nearing the end of his Hollywood life. On 6 April 1997, less than six months before the Redskins' season opening game which would take place in the new 78,600-seat stadium Cooke had built to house his beloved Redskins, Cooke died of a cardiac arrest. After almost a decade of cutting through Washington red tape and investing $360 million of his own money, Cooke's vision of a new Redskins' stadium was realized with the first home game on 14 September 1997.

While Cooke achieved much success in various sports, no amount of money brought him the American trophy won by a very unlikely Canadian horse. Indeed, Cooke's 503-acre Kentucky horse farm, called Elmendorf Farm, did not produce the Kentucky Derby winner Cooke had hoped for. That success befell to the famed Windfields Farm of Oshawa, Ontario, which in the early 1960s bred a horse called Northern Dancer.

On 6 May 1964, the dew was still on the bluegrass when groom Willie Brevard woke the chestnut colt for a slow walk around the barn to loosen his muscles. It was six in the morning in Louisville, and in approximately twelve hours, Canadian-bred **Northern Dancer** would bolt from the starting gate to compete in the 90th Kentucky Derby.

From the time the Dancer first saw the light of day he defied doubters. As a colt, he was small and stocky in stature, and ornery and mischievous by disposition. So unusual was he in fact that when owner E.P. Taylor tried auctioned to the yearling off for $25,000 in 1962, no one made a bid.

Not surprisingly then, when the Dancer entered the gate, measuring 15.2 hands, odds were in favour of the unbeaten Hill Rise who towered a full 10 centimetres above the Canadian dark horse. It didn't help that Hill Rise was also jockeyed by the legendary Bill Showmaker. When the gates opened for the race to begin, however, all bets were off in the

punishing mile and a quarter race. Rounding the final turn and thrusting up the outside, with a quarter mile to go, was the Dancer.

In the stretch, it was a two-horse race. Hill Rise exemplified the classic flowing motion of the long-limbed thoroughbred, and Northern Dancer, ran with with his characteristically quick short strides in a choppy, all-out motion. Thundering past the grandstand, the Dancer refused to be beaten that day, crossing the wire in a record two minutes flat. For the first time, a Canadian-bred horse won the Kentucky Derby.

Unwanted for $25,000 as a yearling in 1962, champion of the most sought-after crown in thoroughbred racing in 1964, Northern Dancer became the greatest stud horse in history, worth over $40 million by 1981. Today, it is estimated that his bloodlines extend to 50 to 70 per cent of all thoroughbred horses. In this way, since his death on 16 November 1990, he has continued to defy those who underestimated the stocky stallion with the three white stockings and a striking white blaze.

One wonders if his ornery nature helped to propell Northern Dancer into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame, one of only three non-human entries. **Sandy Hawley**, one of his human companions in the Hall, has links to the thoroughbred, but a naughty nature is not one of them. Sandy Hawley, also from Oshawa, is the greatest jockey this country has ever produced. He distinguished himself in the sport of horseracing as the ultimate gentleman. At 24, he was the first jockey to ride over 500 winners in a single season, breaking Bill Shoemaker's 20-year record of 485. By the end of his career, which would span thirty years between 1968 and 1998, he recorded 6,449 wins. One wonders then, whether Hawley's soft-spoken nature, combined of course with his ability to push 550 kilograms of muscle and sinew to breakneck speeds, placed the jockey alongside the Dancer in the Hall.

Alberta is a long way from Kentucky, and the rugged life of the cowboy is but a faint mirage as seen from the aristocratic bloodlines of horseracing. In 1912, when the city of Calgary was forgetting its cowboy roots, Guy Weadick, vaudevillian, Wild West performer, and promoter extraordinaire came to town. Falling in love with Alberta's ranch country, Weadick tried to sell the idea of a weeklong rodeo to revive Canada's Western heritage. Canvassing local Calgary businessmen, Weadick initially encountered resistance until the "Big Four," ranchers George Lane and A.J. McLean, beef processor Pat Burns, and brewery owner A.E. Cross, stepped forward to bankroll Weadick's vision.

On Labour Day, 2 September 1912, "The Greatest Outdoor Show On Earth" began. And we have Weadick to thank, the father of the **Stampede** — and an American son. Yes, Canada's symbol of Western heritage is the brainchild of a Rochester, New Yorker born in 1885 to a family of prominent lawyers.

Whereas the Stampede cannot claim a homegrown founder, the game of lacrosse has deep roots in Canada's past, and if anyone in the modern game is worthy of veneration, it is **Jack Bionda**. Born in Huntsville, Ontario on 18 September 1933, Bionda was the first superstar of the sport he would dominate throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. His shot seemed liked a cannon ball, which is part of the reason Bionda is considered to be the greatest to ever play the game of lacrosse. Vancouver Sun columnist Archie McDonald once recalled a 1958 game in which a young reporter, after witnessing Bionda's brilliance, sought a thesaurus. He was searching for another word for "unbelievable." On 12 May 1994, Bill C-212 was passed into law, acknowledging hockey and lacrosse as Canada's official sports. Much has been made of the achievements of Canadians on the ice; but, certainly we have Jack

Bionda to thank for thrilling audiences for more than a decade of play in our official summer sport.

Nicknamed "Baby Face" at a young age, **Jimmy McLarnin** was a professional fighter by the age of 10. At 13 he met his trainer and lifelong friend Charles "Pop" Foster before officially beginning his career at age 15. By 19, McLarnin had $100,000 in the bank and less than a decade later he was welterweight champion of the world. With these successes behind him, at the young age of 29, he would retire from the sport.

Born on 19 December 1906 in Hillsborough, County Down, Ireland, McLarnin was three when he (one of 12 children) and his family moved to Vancouver. Seven years after his arrival, at the age of 10, he began boxing as a way of defending his newspaper corner. Later in his life, McLarnin would note: "I was a professional when I was 10. I got a dollar for my first fight and $60,000 for my last — but in between the one and the 60 grand, boy, there was a lot of hard work."

Under the tutelage of Foster, and with ten successive wins in and around Vancouver, California seemed like the place to be. Now 16, McLarnin and his trainer headed south to San Francisco at the start of 1924. In order to secure better fights, McLarnin lied about his age; yet, it was still three months before the 1.5 metre, 49-kilogram boxer got into the ring. When he did however, the Baby Faced Assassin began slaughtering all comers, making a killing at the bank as well as in the ring. For the next ten years McLarnin would be counted among the world’s best fighters.

In 1936, not yet 30 and riding two victories over future Hall of Fame boxers Tony Canzoneri and Lou Ambers, McLarnin decided to retire from the sport. With enough money in the bank, he would go on to open a machine shop and try his hand at acting, golfing, and even lecturing at

Universities. What of Pop Foster? He bought a house in the same housing development as McLarnin and his family. For almost every day of the remaining 21 years of Foster's life, the trainer dropped in for coffee with his former protégée.

When **George Chuvalo** finally left the boxing ring before 14,000 fans at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens, having felt the full sting of Muhammad Ali, his face was disfigured — nose bent and swollen, eyes bluish slits and a patch of skin missing from his forehead. With this much abuse, baby faced he wasn't. But admired, certainly he was.

It was a fight that was supposed to end very early. Chuvalo entered the 29 March 1966 bout having lost three of his last four major fights; Ali, on the other hand, had knocked out eighteen opponents in twenty-two professional fights and was only in Canada for this fight because he faced an antagonistic American public that was suspicious of his support for Malcolm X, the Black Muslim movement, and his own conversion to Islam, which he announced on 27 February 1964 after his defeat of heavyweight champion Sonny Liston.

Prior to the Toronto fight, bookies had Chuvalo as a 7-1 long shot; journalists were even less forgiving of the Canadian Heavyweight champ. Arthur Daley of the New York Times offered the barb: "They are charging $100 ringside here for a fight that isn't worth 30 cents." Ali floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee for the bout, but the Canadian champion, buoyed by the hometown crowd, absorbed the punishment for the full fifteen rounds. Chuvalo stood toe-to-toe with Ali longer than any other opponent in the heavyweight champ's previous twenty-two fights. In the end, Ali would win in a unanimous decision, but when Chuvalo ducked through the ropes and into the arms of his wife Lynne, with blood running through his matted hair, it was he who had earned the respect of his

opponent, on-looking reporters, and the nation.

Unfortunately, the hardest opponents for Chuvalo to face throughout the rest of his life were the crushing body blows he received outside the ring following his retirement from boxing. In the decade after his exit from the ring in 1978, he lost three of his sons to substance abuse and his wife to suicide. Such tragedies, however, would not stop Chuvalo, who used his story of personal pain to help others fight drug addiction. He has turned to schools, where he visits with Canadian youth to talk about the brutal impact of our culture's glamorization of drug use.

## Activities

### 1. Cultural Appropriation in Sports

In March 1994, Jack Kent Cooke responded to critiques of the name of his professional football team thus: "I have spoken to many, many Indian chiefs [sic] who say they have no objection whatsoever to the nickname. As far as I'm concerned, it's a dead issue. I'm not even interested in it. The name of the Redskins will remain the Redskins."

Numerous professional sports teams such as the Cleveland Indians, the Atlanta Braves, and the Chicago Black Hawks use Indigenous images and names, some of which are considered derogatory racial slurs. Further, many mascots of professional sports teams are styled after Indigenous peoples.

Canadian teams have also received critical attention for their appropriation of Indigenous cultural imagery. Consider the Edmonton Eskimos of the CFL or the Chilliwack Chiefs, a junior hockey team from

BC. Some public and private schools have also come under pressure from their communities to adopt alternate mascots. Moreover, Indigenous peoples are not the only cultural group to claim cultural appropriation: recently the Regina Raiders, a junior hockey team in Saskatchewan came under fire from the Canadian Arab Federation, who claimed that their new mascot was a stereotypical image of an Arabian "Raider."

The naming of sports teams and sports mascots after Indigenous people is part of North America's colonial history. As North America (including Canada) was resettled by people from other places, these people often assumed a right to control Indigenous lands, resources and bodies. This powerful assumption extended to the domain of culture, where newcomers often assumed a right to take, remake, and sell indigenous culture.

Since the 1960s, many sports teams have faced opposition from activists due to their continued use of Indigenous names and imagery. Activists argue that Indigenous people were not consulted by sports teams about the use of their names and imagery and that its continuing usage promotes stereotypes.

Some sports teams, such as that of Jack Kent Cooke, have remained strident about their right to use a racial slur as a team name, often citing the consent of some members of the community as their justification. Other teams have decided to change their names or get rid of Indigenous mascots in response to the arguments of activists and Indigenous people.

Now it's your turn to weigh in on the controversial issue of naming professional sports teams and their mascots after Indigenous peoples. Students are to look for a professional team near their community that uses Indigenous imagery or mascots, or, teams that maintain imagery

and mascots offensive for other reasons. Students will propose a new name and mascot for the team. The proposal, which will include a name, mascot, team colours, and designs, must reflect the history of the area from which the team represents.  For example, the San Francisco 49ers reflect the city's historical relationship with the California gold rush. The Calgary Stampeders is a direct reference to the Western heritage of Alberta while the Edmonton Oilers alludes to the primary industry of the province. Each student must present their updated team to the class, explaining why they chose the name and images they did, and why the previous ones could be seen as offensive.

**2. Poster Through Time**

Every year the Calgary Stampede has been held, there is an accompanying poster. Some posters explain what to expect at the event, and all reflect the historical and social context of the celebrations. In groups of two or three, students are to deconstruct a poster and explain how it relates to historical events of the era and particular social and cultural attitudes. For example, a poster from the 1920s showcases airplanes. Posters from 1918 as well as 1977 highlight the Stampede's relationship to the local First Nation's People. After reproducing the poster, students are to identify the various historical and cultural markers of their chosen poster.

**3. Heroes and Villains Through Time**

Professional wrestling can be seen as a window into cultural biases and fears. For example, during the Cold War, The Iron Sheik and Nikolai Volkoff were popular villains. Each student is to introduce a new wrestler to the professional circuit. The new character must reflect the cultural attitudes of an era. For example, a wrestler from the 1940s may reflect

anti-German attitudes. After developing their characters, students must "sell" him or her to the rest of the class, explaining why their creation would be popular considering the historical and cultural context that they chose.

**4. War in the Ring**

Jimmy McLarnin boxed in an era that accentuated ethnic rivalries. Therefore, a considerable amount of attention was paid to Irish-Jewish rivalries. McLarnin had a string of victories over top Jewish fighters, including Al Singer and Benny Leonard. Is this attention to ethnic rivalries healthy or not? Do such contests help or hinder cross-cultural understanding? In a 250-word essay students are to explore an example in history during which ethnic rivalries have been emphasised. For example, consider the national importance of baseball games between the Cuban and American teams. Or explore the infamous "Soccer War" of 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras. Violence erupted following a European water-polo championship final when Serbia and Montenegro beat Croatia. Throughout the match Croat fans were reported to have yelled, "Kill the Serbs."

**5. Float like a butterfly...**

Muhammad Ali is famous for his fists as well as his verbal poetry. George Chuvalo had his own quips as well, saying after his first fight with Ali, "The judges voted for Ali, but he had to be taken to the hospital afterwards while I went dancing with my wife." Students are to compete for the greatest quote uttered by an athlete. Once students have found what they believe to be the best quote, students are to explain why the words are memorable. What makes the phrase particularly timeless? Finally, as the final part of the competition, each student is to say the

quote to the rest of the class, trying to deliver its full effect (perhaps even taking on the accent, if there is one, of the originator). The class then rates the quote and its delivery on a scale of one to ten.

**Resources**

**Footprint Videos**

Torchy Peden
Whipper Billy Watson
Jack Kent Cooke
Northern Dancer
Sandy Hawley
The Calgary Stampede
Jack Bionda
Jimmy McLarnin
George Chuvalo

**The Canadian Encyclopedia**

Northern Dancer
Jimmy McLarnin
Boxing
Sandy Hawley
Calgary Stampede
Cycling
William J. Peden
William Watson
George Chuvalo

Joseph Blasioli. The Last Round – Chuvalo vs. Ali [video recording]. Toronto: National Film Board of Canada in association with CBC

Television, 2003.
(A documentary chronicling the events leading to the Chuvalo-Ali fight in 1966. The film made its world premiere at the 2003 Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in Toronto where it won the Special Jury Prize. It was also nominated for a 2004 Genie as the Best Documentary Feature.)

Donald Fisher. Lacrosse: A History of the Game.Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Muriel Lennox. Northern Dancer: The Legend and His Legacy. Toronto: Hushion House, 2000.

Sydney Pollack. They Shoot Horses, Don't They [video recording]. Los Angeles, American Broadcasting Company, 1969.
(This film tells the story of a depression era dance marathon that becomes the stage upon which a number of lost souls seek purpose in their lives, cheered on by a lifeless audience. It is a revealing look at the desperation of the youth during the period as well as the marathon fad that gripped the continent.)

Patrick Tivy. Calgary Stampede: An Altitude Superguide. Canmore, Alberta: Altitude Pub Canada, 1995.