Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

World Champions

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprints videos for Miss Supertest, Gary Beck, Ian Millar and Big Ben, Steve Bauer, Donny Lalonde, Cliff Thorburn and Elfi Schlegel. World Champions come in all sizes, shapes, and horsepower. These athletes include two of the four twentieth century non-human entries into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame. Two world champions vaulted over bars - one as an equestrian show jumper and the other as a gymnast. Whatever the ring, road, or arena of adversity, they are all linked by their claim to the distinction as world champions.

Aims

To increase student awareness of Canadian athletes as world champions; to learn how they have demonstrated their athleticism on the national and international stages; to understand the challenges each of these Canadians faced in pursing their goals; to look at the connections between human and non-human champions; to question the role of corporations in sport; and to explore acceptable limits of the athletic pursuit of world recognition.

Background

It is the story of a Canadian boat challenging the mighty maritime nation to the south and of a trophy vied for year after year, proclaiming the fastest vessel on the waters. At 9.4 metres long, 3.7 metres wide and weighing 3,175 kilograms, she was the epitome of seafaring speed; when finally retired, she remained undefeated. If this story sounds like the tale of the famous *Bluenose*, it's because we commemorate the success of that champion on a coin and in our history books. But there was another boat that seemed to ride the air as it moved across the top of the water to victory. Driven by Bob Hayward, a mild-mannered and soft-spoken chicken farmer from Embro, Ontario, *Miss Supertest III* was the fastest hydroplane powerboat in the world, reaching speeds of 290 kilometres per hour.

Ten years after Christopher Columbus Smith drove the first speedboat at 14.5 km/h on the St. Claire River in Michigan in 1893, Sir Alfred Harmsworth, proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, introduced the first international speedboat challenge, the British International Harmsworth Trophy. In the inaugural race, held on Saturday 11 July 1903 in Queenstown Harbour, Ireland,*Napier I* from England sped to victory at what now seems the glacial speed of 31.43 km/h. In the years to follow, few would suggest that 20th century speedboats were slow. Instead, as the Harmsworth competition grew, boat speed increased each year and it also became obvious that England and the United States were the dominant powers in the sport. By 1956, the*Shanty I* reached 144.439 km/h and continued America's 39-year dominance over the Harmsworth. In 1958, however, something changed. Specifically, Jim Thompson, president of the Supertest Petroleum Corporation decided to test the waters.

As a boy growing up in Embro, Ontario, Bob Hayward loved racing boats

with outboard motors, and after working as a farmer and trucker until 1947, he joined Thompson's boat racing crew. Initially, Hayward lent his expertise in fine-tuning the engines and test-driving. But by 1957, Hayward replaced Thompson in the pilot's seat and the next year, the Canadian team targeted world supremacy in powerboat racing by designing and building the next generation of hydro plane machine.

Christened *Miss Supertest III* in 1959, the new boat weighed more than three tonnes, which was heavier than most. With a 2000 horsepower Rolls-Royce Griffon engine, *Miss Supertest III* hydroplaned 20 centimetres out of the water, while its propeller spun at 11,000 revolutions per minute.

In Motor City, USA on 4 July 1959, Hayward piloted *Miss Supertest III* to a win in the Detroit Memorial. Less than two months later, the Canadian crew challenged the American champion and America's winning streak on the Detroit River for the Harmsworth. After three 72.4-kilometre races, the American dynasty ended, and Canadian dominance in the sport began.

By virtue of winning the previous year, *Miss Supertest* raced at home on Lake Ontario near Picton in 1960. Hayward astounded the hydro world by turning in a 203-km/h lap and a second Harmsworth. One year later, with his usual pre-race calming tonic — three quarters of a bottle of milk and a glass of clover honey — providence again answered Hayward with a third Harmsworth. Tragically, it was also his last.

When racing *Miss Supertest II* (*Miss Supertest III* was reserved for Harmsworth challenges) in the Silver Cup regatta on the Detroit River on 10 September 1961, Hayward entered a turn at more than 200 km/h. The boat's tenuous connection with the water was severed in the turn and the boat became airborne before flipping over in an awful crash. The force of

the impact broke Hayward's neck.

Given the way he died, it's important to note that Hayward was not a daredevil but a very careful man, fully conscious of the power of the machines he drove. As he once explained, "Sure I'm afraid. A man would have to be crazy not to be. And I'm not crazy. There's always a lot of risk when you're going over 160 miles per hour [258 kilometres per hour]."

If Hayward understood the dangers of his sport, the same could also be said of Gary Beck, a world champion known as the "Quiet Canadian," who erupted onto the car drag racing scene in the 1970s. Curiously, Beck's moniker is a misnomer in two senses. First of all, Beck was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, and only moved to Edmonton with his new bride in 1969. Secondly, he was arguably the most dominant top fuel racer of the 1970s and early 1980s, driving machines not associated with quiet.

Major drag racing events are fast, furious, and loud affairs. Snapping and cracking at the starting line, cars emit nitro fumes and then in a burst of kinetic energy, twin plumes of yellow-orange flames erupt from the machines as they plummet down the track. In less than six seconds, the silenced engines are replaced with the eruption of ecstatic crowds of speed-junkies.

Top Fuel dragsters aremain the fastest-accelerating vehicles in the world. The 7.6-metre-long cars can cover the quarter-mile (402 metres) in 4.4 seconds at speeds faster than 531 km/h. In his day, Beck won the first time he ever strapped himself into one of these landlocked missiles at a national event. But he was not a babe-in-arms to the driver's seat. At the time of his breakthrough at the 1972 Indy US Nationals (considered the granddaddy of the Top Fuel drag race circuit), Beck was thirty years old

and had been racing stock cars and dragsters for more than ten years.

The following year, spectators at the US nationals had 5.96 seconds to see Beck speed past at 392.5 km/h to win his second championship. A year later, with Beck behind the wheel and Edmonton engine builder Ray Peets behind the design, the Canadian team captured their first National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Top Fuel World Championship. Interestingly, their 1974 racing effort was underwritten by MacDonald's Tobacco Company and their Export "A" cigarette brand. They were one of the very first teams in professional racing to fly a corporate banner, something that is the lifeblood of the sport today.

Throughout his career, Beck was outstanding as a record-setting driver. He became the first Top Fuel racer to run in the 5.5's (1981), 5.4's (1982), and 5.3's (1983), and by the time he left the NHRA tour in 1986, Beck had won 19 Top Fuel titles, along with the 1974 and 1983 World Championships. Beck officially retired at the end of the 1986 season and in 1999, he and Peets were inducted into the Canadian Hall of Fame. Though he may have been misnamed the "Quiet Canadian," he is no doubt a world champion "Adopted Canadian."

If NHRA Top Fuel dragsters produce approximately 8,000 horsepower in the race to victory, show jumping relies on but one horse and one rider to produce a champion. And the great Canadian pairing of Big Ben and his rider, Ian Millar, certainly became magnificent champions over their career.

Show jumping has the air of rarified privilege. So when the big Belgian Warmblood gelding and the ever-humble native of Perth, Ontario broke into the sport in the late 1980s, it was startling how many Canadians held their common collective breath with each equestrian leap. The summit of

their career, a height unmatched by any team before or since, came in consecutive World Cups. In 1988, the most coveted indoor title was held in Gothenburg, Sweden. By the end of the competition, on 10 April, Millar was the proud owner of the pride of Canada and the pride of Sweden, each with its own distinctive horsepower. Big Ben and his rider accepted congratulations from Princess Anne, and, as a bonus prize for winning the World Cup, Millar was given a brand-new Swedish-built Volvo.

Leap forward one year and across the Atlantic, and the unprecedented was about to happen on 12 April 1989 in Tampa, Florida. Before Princess Anne and a near-capacity crowd of 8,000, Millar and Big Ben made history by becoming the first horse-rider combination to win back-to-back World Cup Finals. With characteristic modesty, Millar remarked after the event: "You've got to understand that all I did was escort this horse around the courses. The hero is Big Ben." But in a sport where success is a measure of the harmony of rider and horse, Big Ben would surely have returned neighs of admiration for his rider.

In another saddle, in another sport, Steve Bauer rode into Canadian sporting history. It was a long, hard climb for the Fenwich, Ontario native, but he ascended to heights no other Canadian reached. A yellow jersey tells the tale.

Like many Canadian children, Bauer's route to success begins with a sweater on an ice hockey rink. Devoted to Canada's unofficial national sport in the winter, Bauer and friends would also spend their summers racing around the small Ontario town on their bicycles. By the age of sixteen, Bauer joined the St. Catharines Cycling Club, and pedals replaced skates for good.

In 1977 Bauer joined the National Cycling Team, competing in team

pursuit. After developing his skills and reputation on the North American circuit, he was the favourite in the 190-km 1984 Olympic road race in Los Angeles. Half a metre separated his silver medal from the gold, but the distance between Bauer and the mecca of cycling, Europe, was quickly erased when he turned pro and crossed the ocean for new and steeper hills to climb.

As part of his introduction into the ranks of professional riding, Bauer began this stage of his career by playing the martyr. Bauer joined the French La Vie Claire Team, and as a rookie, his job was to ride in support of, and if necessary, sacrifice himself for the team's two stars — Bernard Hinault and Greg LeMond. In 1985, his first of eleven consecutive runs in the Tour de France, Bauer won and wore the white jersey, designating the leading rookie, almost the entire race. He also preformed his martyrdom well, helping Hinault and Lemond to finish 1st and 2nd respectively.

Three years later, amid French cheers for "Le Canadien," Bauer reached the pinnacle of his career, winning the first stage of the Tour and wearing the coveted yellow jersey for five days. When the race ended on a Sunday in July along the Champs Elysées in Paris, he finished fourth in a race many consider the toughest sporting event in the world.

If the Tour de France is considered the toughest athletic event in the world, boxers have often been thought of as the toughest athletes in the world. And on 7 November 1988, at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, Winnipeg native Donny Lalonde proved himself against one of the best the sport has known. The "Golden Boy" of Canada and the World Boxing Council (WBC) light heavyweight champion faced middleweight champion Sugar Ray Leonard.

Lalonde's route to the ring began from tragic darkness. Repeatedly knocked unconscious as a child by his stepfather, as a teenager, the boxing ring served as Lalonde's escape. On this night, the power punching, 1.9 metre Lalonde felled the seasoned Leonard early on, but the master technician of the ring recovered and went on to floor Lalonde twice in the ninth before taking both the WBC Light Heavyweight title and the previously vacant WBC Super Middleweight title belts in victory. Lalonde returned home and kept fighting. Lalonde's last fight took place on 7 July 2003, against Virgil Hill.

The very British game of snooker finds its historical genesis and its inspiration in part from the game of pyramids and other pool games. In the history of the Snooker World Championships there have been very few non-British winners over the years. And yet if regal London is a long way from the Bowladrome on Yates Street in Gibson's, BC, in 1980 this distance would be bridged by the nerve and talent of Cliff Thorburn.

At the age of thirteen, Thorburn found the billiard tables in the basement of his local bowling hall. Years later, his affection and talent for the cue and ball would provide him with the clarity that took him to the heights of his chosen pursuit. By the 1980 Championships, Thorburn had three consecutive Canadian Open championships under his cue, but he had not gotten beyond the quarterfinals of any other event. This all changed on 5 May when Thorburn became the first overseas player to win Snooker's greatest prize.

Few at Gibson's Bowladrome would have believed that Thorburn would achieve such success, never mind make a living through snooker. At the age of sixteen, when the young Thorburn left school, many assumed he was destined to clear curbsides, not to clear snooker tables around the world. Yet this is what Thorburn was able to do, picking up an Order of

Canada in 1988 on the way.

Thorburn's win at the World Championships made him a household name on the British Isles, even moving one viewer to call him Clark Gable's double. On this side of the Atlantic, another Canadian athlete was compared to a very different Hollywood star.

Dubbed Canada's Shirley Temple, Elfi Schlegel tumbled into the hearts of Canadians and eventually into the homes of North Americans. Born to Swiss immigrants in Toronto, Ontario on 17 May 1964, Schlegel grew up in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke, where she began gymnastics at age seven.

In 1972, as Schlegel thrived at the Xoces-Eagles Gymnastics Club near Toronto, members of Edmonton's bid committee for the Commonwealth Games were in Munich convincing voters from other Commonwealth countries that Edmonton was not a suburb of Toronto. After allaying fears that the capital of Alberta did in fact have running water and indoor plumbing, Edmonton was chosen as the host city for the 1978 Commonwealth Games.

When the 11th Commonwealth Games opened on 3 August, the Queen participated for the first time in the opening ceremonies. Among the 1474 athletes from 46 countries was a 12-year-old gymnast from Canada. Wearing a ponytail, and competing in the Commonwealth's first gymnastics competition, Schlegel captivated Canadians with her performances. This affection would only grow when Schlegel and her three teammates won the team gold medal, well ahead of England and New Zealand.

Two years later, had the boycott by Canada and other Western nations

not occurred during the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, perhaps Canada would have seen our first Olympic medal contender competing for the top gymnastic laurels among the world's best. Instead, the media darling became a media commentator. Schlegel ended up covering Commonwealth and Olympic games for CBC, and working with NBC covering the Olympic women's gymnastics at the 1992 Barcelona, 1996 Atlanta and 2000 Sydney Games.

As the world champions above illustrate, the road less travelled is often the one that has led to victory. And with any road that is avoided, there are more bumps and potholes to navigate and fewer people to applaud one's voyage. But perhaps what ultimately makes a world champion is the journey through these troubles.

Activities

1. Culture Jam a Car

As a condition of Export "A's" sponsorship of Gary Beck's drag racing team, Beck was required to attend numerous car shows and corporate extravaganzas where his team and the car were put on display.

As a class, list sporting events, locations, and teams that are sponsored by and bear the branding of a company. Discuss whether corporate logos and sponsorship have a place in sport. For instance, is it appropriate for a cigarette or alcoholcompany to display its message at events? If not, who will provide financial support for such events? Can we expect companies to sponsor teams and competitions without taking advantage of advertising? Next, students are to consult the Media Foundation website. There, students can learn about how to "culture jam"; that is, how to

appropriate the symbols and slogans of companies to communicate a very different (and often antagonistic) message to a specific audience. Once students have learned about culture jamming, students are to create their own decals to place on a drag race car, effectively "jamming" the originally intended message of a corporate image.

2. Colonial Connections

It could be argued that the invention of snooker is an incidental result of British colonialism. Indeed, many sports that have a global reach are a result of imperialism. Rugby, cricket, and even ice hockey can draw roots from the metropole. And when Australia defeats England in rugby, or when the Indian cricket team trounces its former colonial masters, victory takes on historic importance. Of course, the relationship is reciprocal, as Great Britain adapted its own sporting culture to the specifics of the colonial landscape.

Students are to consider the global development of a specific sport and how it has links to the history of colonialism. How did the environment and cultural specifics of a former colony affect how the sport was played? For example, consider how ice hockey developed in Canada, a country where ice-covered lakes and ponds offered a surface for play. In an essay of 250 words, students are to discuss the development of a sport and outline its links with the history of colonialism. Each essay should include a timeline that describes moments when the sport changed in response to the colonial cultural and environmental landscape.

Lesson 3. Tour de Canada

In July 1903, sixty cyclists travelled 2,500 kilometres in nineteen days through the cities, towns and countryside of France. In the early years of

the Tour de France, competitors were expected to ride through the night, fans left nails on the road in front of their favourites' rivals, while riders took car trips and even train rides. By the 85th edition of the Tour, held between 11 July and 12 August 1998, about 200 cyclists covered almost 3,500 kilometres (roughly the distance from London to the Suez Canal in Egypt) from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, and after a ferry transfer to the Continent, to Paris on the Avenue des Champs Elysées. This was also the year when the race nearly came off the rails, as the murky world of blood doping in professional cycling was laid bare for all to see.

As the biggest sporting event outside soccer's World Cup and the Olympic Games, the Tour de France is a whirlwind voyage for competitors and fans alike. It is a chance for armchair sport tourists to experience the country that bears the gruelling race's name.

As a class, discuss the Tour de France and its importance as a stage to glimpse the country of France (as well as other European nations) and as a source of pride for the French people. Next, canvass suggestions of specific locations where a "Tour de Canada" could pass. What places would best highlight the country and represent the breadth of the cultural and geographical variety? Finally, in groups of two or three, students are to design a "Tour de Canada" that includes 21 stages (the average number of stages in a Tour). Each stage should be accompanied by a paragraph, explaining why this section of the race was chosen and how it is important to the historic, cultural, or geographical map of Canada. It may be helpful for students to look at the Tour de France and the various stages it has included over its history.

4. No pain, no gain?

Graceful and flawlessness - the hallmarks of a world class gymnast.

However, behind every magnificent feat of strength and agility are countless painful and even debilitating falls and tumbles. In 1980 at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens for the World Cup, Elfi Schlegel dislocated a toe on her left foot following an awkward fall from the uneven bars. Regardless of the injury, she iced her toe and performed with maximum difficulty on her final two events, the beam and the floor exercise.

Schlegel's determination is laudable, and perhaps this trait is what helps make her a world champion. Ultimately it was her decision to test herself to such lengths, but how much external pressure, from coaches, fans or parents, either explicit or implicit, influenced her resolution? Can a teenager be expected to know his or her own pain threshold? We might ask this question otherwise by saying, when does physical striving become athletic abuse?

Use this final question as a motion for a classroom debate. Break the class into four groups: athletes, coaches, the media and fans. Each group is to present an argument outlining the limits to which athletes should be pushed in order to become world champions.

5. Man, beast, or machine?

There are only four non-human entries into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame: *The Bluenose* schooner, *Miss Supertest III*, Kentucky Derby winner Northern Dancer and show jumper Big Ben. Quite possibly, Bob Hayward, Gary Beck and Ian Millar would not be world champions had they not benefited from the horsepower (technological or innate) of their chosen means of travel. Conceivably, therefore, Steve Bauer also owes at least a smidgen of his success to the bicycles he rode during his professional career. These observations beg the question as to whether a world champion is more than the individual athlete. No doubt Hayward,

Beck, Millar, and Bauer steered their vehicles with athletic skill and are world champions, but what degree do each owe to a machine beyond their influence?

Students are to choose a Canadian athlete who has relied on a non-human entity to achieve athletic greatness. After researching their selected athlete and non-human, students are to list the attributes of each and how these contributed to success. For example, consider recent developments in competitive swimwear that is designed to mirror the effects of fish skin. Or, how does the racing gear of a skier determine how fast they descend a course, especially in a sport where hundredths of a second can mean the difference between first and also-ran. Finally, after listing the attributes of each, students should decide on what percentage (50% or 25%, etc.) illustrates the degree to which the athlete and the non-human are responsible for the victory in question.

Resources

Footprints Videos
Miss Supertest
Gary Beck
Ian Millar and Big Ben
Donny Lalonde
Cliff Thorburn
Elfi Schlegel

The Canadian Encyclopedia
Gary Beck
Ian Millar
Big Ben

Best, David. *Canada: Our century in sport*. Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002.

Ryan, Joan. *Little girls in pretty boxes: the making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skaters*. Warner Books: New York, 2000

Schlegel, Elfi and Claire Ross Dunn. *The Gymnastics boo: The Young Performer's Guide to Gymnastics*. Toronto: Firefly Books, 2001