

# **Chapter 1**

## **The Early Years**

In the earliest competitions of lacrosse, a goal was known as a game, and it took three games to win a match. Some matches lasted only a few minutes while others were so hard-fought, they had to be postponed due to darkness. These early competitions were dominated by an Iroquois team from Caughnawaga. Lacrosse for Canadians of European descent began in Montreal in 1856, but teams were no match for their native adversaries.

The team from Caughnawaga that was so dominant, that they would often play shorthanded just to give opponents a chance. On August 28, 1860, Caughnawaga, bolstered by St. Regis, played a unit of Montreal and Beaver players at the Montreal Cricket Club before the Prince of Wales. Dr. W. George Beers, a Montreal dentist, was the Montreal goaltender.

It was in 1867, that Dr. Beers formed a set of rules with the assistance of his Montreal Lacrosse Club teammates. A ball of hard rubber replaced the Indian ball of hair stuffed in deerskin, the stick was enlarged, and the number of players was standardized at twelve a side. Dr. Beers later went on (in 1869) to write a book entitled, "Lacrosse, the National Game of Canada". The lofty proclamation caught on, although despite popular belief, it was never enacted as such by parliament.

On the day of Confederation, July 1, 1867, Caughnawaga was featured against Montreal who defeated the locals by a score of 3-2. Later that year, Captain W.B. Johnson took Caughnawaga to England for a series of exhibition games. Lacrosse was now being played in England, but growth was slow. However, it was given a successful boost in popularity in 1876 when Dr. Beers took Montreal and Caughnawaga back to the British Isles. Matches were held in Belfast, Dublin, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, Bristol, and London.

A highlight of the tour was a command performance before Queen Victoria on June 27 and June 28. The Caughnawaga athletes were so popular, that in 1883, Dr. Beers took them back to England for another exhibition tour under the auspices of the Governor-General of Canada.

In 1998, the Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame introduced a new "Team" category. Each year, an outstanding field or box lacrosse team is honoured by the sport's national shrine in New Westminster. It is only fitting that Caughnawaga was named the first team to enter the Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame's new "Team" category.

Communities like Oshawa, St. Catharines, Fergus, Brampton, and Peterborough all began organized lacrosse in or around the year 1872. The following account of lacrosse being played back in 1878 was taken entirely from the Oshawa Times in 1929 when the Oshawa General Motors senior field lacrosse team won the Mann Cup, emblematic of senior lacrosse supremacy in the Dominion of Canada.

### **"OLLIE" SEBERT, VETERAN OSHAWA LACROSSE STAR RECALLS TEAM OF 1878**

*Resident of Whitby is only member now living in this district of famous team "The Maple Leafs", which won the lacrosse championship of Canada 51 years ago.*

*"Ollie" Sebert of Whitby was a veteran lacrosse player originally from Oshawa, and captain of the Maple Leafs who won the lacrosse championship of Canada in 1878 after defeating Brampton. He expressed great delight at the recent victories of the General Motors lacrosse team and their winning of the Dominion Championship and the Mann Cup, when interviewed by the Times recently.*

*Mr. Sebert is now in his 76th year and has lived in Whitby for the last 49 years. "Ollie" is the only player of that once famous "Maple Leafs" team still living in this vicinity. A number of players have died, while others have moved to distant parts.*

*In describing the early days of lacrosse in Oshawa, Mr. Sebert informed the Times that he, along with a number of other young men, were the first interested in the games played at Whitby and were later taught the game by two blacksmiths who gave them excellent training. In those days, the practice field was the site of the Queen's Hotel known as the Bassett block on Simcoe Street north. Dressing rooms did not exist, so the players had to wear their uniforms from home.*

## **HECTIC DAYS**

Those were the hectic days of lacrosse in Oshawa. The team that called themselves the "Maple Leafs" gradually improved over the next four to five years until they gained the right to meet Brampton, who for several years, held the Dominion Championship of Canada. Peterborough, Brantford, Six Nations, Millbrook, Toronto, Tecumseh and other teams were defeated before Oshawa won the right to vie with the champions.

## **THE OLD SYSTEM**

The first game of the series was played in Brampton. In those days, games were four 20-minute periods. However, the game was not awarded to the team with the greatest number of goals at the end of the eighty minutes. It was awarded to the team that scored the first three goals out of five, no matter how long it took to do it. This is the reason why some teams battled for the greater part of the day, sometimes, before a winner was declared. The contest in Brampton was a close one and fiercely fought from start to finish. After only two hours of play, Brampton won by a 3-2 score to give them a one goal lead to carry to Oshawa. In commenting on the game at Brampton, Mr. Sebert recalled that many of the teams played barefoot. The Oshawa team in trying to get a "line" on Brampton had seen them play in Toronto against an Indian team. As both teams played in their bare feet and put up a flashy display of lacrosse, the Oshawa team decided they would do likewise. On their arrival on the playing field in Brampton, much to their sorrow, found that it was a stubble field and that the other team was wearing rubbers. The Oshawa players were at a great disadvantage so the game had to be played as best they could. After a strenuous battle the local team lost out, and although there were no sore heads in Oshawa, there were many sore feet.

## A QUICK VICTORY

The return game in Oshawa only lasted fifteen minutes. The home team swept Brampton completely, and scored three goals to win the game before the visitors knew what had happened. It was recounted that many spectators were still on their way to the playing field expecting to see a great battle when they met the defeated players homeward bound.

The game was played within the race track on Park Road south, which has long since been built upon and is now remembered by only a few as the site of the championship lacrosse match. The field was more or less pasture land, but served the purpose well and was used by the Maple Leafs for many years.

Many great athletes from other sports tried their hand at lacrosse. Some players that come to mind from the world of hockey include Newsy Lalonde, Lionel Conacher, Joe Malone, Paddy Moran, Mickey Ion (in the Hockey Hall of Fame as a referee), Red Story, and Punch Imlach. Another athlete, Tommy Burns, played field lacrosse for Galt and was also the first Canadian boxer to win the World Heavyweight title in 1907. Tommy weighed in at only 172 pounds and was just 5'7" tall. He was the first white boxer to ever compete against an African American, breaking the colour barrier for boxing. He died a pauper in Vancouver.

The following excerpt is from his book "The Fighting Goalie".

*If ever there was a good training ground for boxing it was the brand of field lacrosse played in Canada in the last years of the nineteenth century. It was a violent, rough-and-tumble game in which players routinely clubbed one another over the head, back, and shoulders with their sticks. Fistfights were almost as common as goals. The game was so vicious that one Toronto team purchased sewing kits so the trainer could stitch up any players who suffered facial cuts on road trips. "The move is a wise one, as the physician's bill for stitching up the boys at Cornwall aggregated \$12", the Toronto Globe reported in the fall of 1899. The newspaper added, "Some of the members have suggested an ambulance corps should accompany the team."*

During one particularly savage game in St. Catharines, Ontario, the home team openly declared it would disable any Orangeville player who dared to even touch the ball. The first visitor to do so was kicked so viciously that one of his kidneys ruptured. Before the match was over, a second Orangeville man had suffered a fractured kneecap. A third man sustained a punctured lung and a fourth required seven stitches to close a scalp wound. When the Orangeville players attempted to leave the field early, they were hemmed in by hundreds of hostile St. Catharines fans. The frightened athletes protested to the referee, but possibly fearing for his own safety, he allowed the game to continue. Afterwards, two members of the home team were jailed for assault causing bodily harm. Such incidents caused the Canadian Sportsman magazine to declare, "Lacrosse is killing itself; it is too savage."

In spite of the brutality, or perhaps because of it, the game was enormously popular with the public. Spectators were just coming into fashion at the time, and Canadians could not get enough of the game. The pioneer era was ending, and people had more time - and money - for recreational pursuits. Although it is hard to believe now, lacrosse was the most popular game in the country. Major League Baseball was just getting off the ground, basketball had yet to be invented, and the National Hockey League did not exist. Whenever a lacrosse game was staged, huge crowds turned out. Championship matches were so popular that mayors of the opposing communities would declare civic holidays so everyone could attend.

Another great athlete that tried his hand at lacrosse was Noah Brusso (a.k.a. Tommy Brusso – the great boxer). Because he was so much smaller than the other players, Noah was inserted into the Galt net, where he quickly developed into a top-notch goalie. His cat-like reflexes caught the attention of reporters. After Galt upset Toronto 7-1 in a crucial match, The Globe informed shocked readers, "*The contest was much closer than the result would show. The work of Brusso was magnificent, he proved invulnerable.*" Noah, however, was doing more than blocking shots. He was right in the thick of the nasty fights that were commonplace at every lacrosse match.

The London Free Press reported, Brusso had a defense all his own. *The ordinary goaltender relies upon his stick to protect the net, but Brusso has never lost sight of the fact that hands were known long before lacrosse sticks. Accordingly, when an aggressive person approaches Brusso's net in a way that implies familiarity, Brusso not infrequently meets the intruder with what is a technically known as a "stiff punch."*

In the ruthless world of lacrosse, players had to fight to survive. Nevertheless, Noah's conduct made him the most hated player in the league. Inevitably, his antics got him into trouble with referees, who began tossing him out of games on a regular basis. Desperate to keep him in the line-up, Galt's coach began bribing Noah to stay out of trouble. The team, which paid its players \$25 per week, offered him a \$50 bonus for each match he completed without receiving a game misconduct. With that incentive, he managed to control his hot temper for the rest of the season.

With Noah behaving himself, Galt won the Canadian junior lacrosse championship, losing just three of twenty games. Along the way, Brusso posted an astonishing total of five shutouts. As far as The Galt Weekly reporter was concerned, the only way the opposition could beat him was by luck. After he narrowly missed his sixth shutout in a game against St. Marys, the newspaper noted, *"The fact they did not score was because Brusso was, for the moment, out of his goal and the ball shot through unhindered"*. In a league in where teams routinely scored ten to twelve goals per contest, Noah seldom surrendered more than one or two. Time and again he was the difference between victory and defeat. In one particularly memorable game, Guelph dominated Galt throughout the early going, only to find itself trailing 6-0. As Noah continued to slam the door with one dazzling save after another, his opponents became increasingly frustrated. At half-time they simply gave up, walked off the field and went home.

Brusso's remarkable skill also led his junior team to victories over much older and bigger players from the Brampton intermediates and the Fergus seniors. Brampton scored just twice before going down to an embarrassing 7-2 defeat. Against the vaunted Fergus Thistles, he was even more impressive, giving up only one goal - and a disputed one at that - in backstopping Galt to an unlikely 3-1 triumph. His work in that contest again gained him national attention. A Toronto writer reported Noah had "turned back one charge after another."

What made the victory all the more remarkable was the difference in the sizes of the teams. Brusso and his buddies had vanquished *“as fine an athletic body of men as Ontario can produce, averaging easily 155 pounds a man. Their speed, agility, and strength was marvelous, and their endurance correspondingly great. The local players will not tip the scales at more than an average of 130 pounds, yet they scored three goals to their opponent’s one. The solitary goal was disallowed by the umpire, but the referee (who was from Fergus) overruled his decision and the one stood.”*

Tommy Burns played lacrosse well enough that there are lacrosse cards of him playing for Vancouver in a 1911 set that has become a valuable collector's item.

Although Newsy Lalonde is best remembered today as a hockey player, he was also prominent in lacrosse, during the early years of the 20th century. Lalonde earned more in lacrosse than he did in hockey. He started playing in 1905 as a goaltender, but moved to the attack position in 1910, becoming the sport's greatest star. He would break the scoring record for his Montreal team in 1910 with 31 goals.

In 1912, Lalonde was signed to be player-manager of the Toronto Lacrosse Club, but almost immediately changed his mind and joined an exodus of players heading west for big contracts. He was signed by Con Jones to play for Vancouver for \$5,500 for one season. In comparison, as a hockey player, his salary in 1910-11 for the Montreal Canadiens was \$1,300, which was considered high for the time. As late as 1920, he could not get more than \$2,000 a year playing hockey. Lalonde scored an incredible 66 goals for the Montreal Nationals in 1914. His final full season was in 1917, but played a handful of games the following year to end his lacrosse career.

The following few paragraphs were taken from the book "Oshawa" by M. McIntyre Hood.

## **LACROSSE**

Lacrosse is the sport with the longest history of all the Oshawa sporting activities. It provided the first Oshawa team to take part in any outside sports competition. That was in 1872, when lacrosse enthusiasm was at its height. This team played against teams from Port Hope, Bowmanville, Millbrook, and other Central Ontario towns that were just as large as

Oshawa. This enthusiasm lasted from 1870 to 1875. The interest soon waned and the game did not establish itself again for a period of 25 years.

The revival of lacrosse started about the turn of the century when a four-team league composed of Williams Piano, Ontario Malleable Iron, McLaughlin Carriage, and a town team was organized. The games in those days were played at Eli Edmondson's Prospect Park. In 1907, a famous team, the Oshawa 'Shamrocks', which had in its lineup the legendary Newsy Lalonde, brought its first lacrosse fame to Oshawa. Thereafter, lacrosse continued, but not at a championship level, until 1921 when the Oshawa team lost in the Ontario intermediate final to St. Mary's.

Lacrosse was given its greatest boost in 1928 when General Motors of Canada sponsored a senior team. A great collection of lacrosse stars was assembled, including players of the stature of Chuck Barron, Chuck Davidson, Tilly Stokes, Buster Whitton, Ernie Shepley, Smokey Fox, Bob Stevenson, Toots White, Mel Whyte, Mac McGrath, Ted Reeves, Kelly DeGray, Red Spencer, Smitty Smithson, Jack Walsh, Pete Walsh, and the goalie Patty Shannon. Hank Munro coached the seniors and Harry Lott the juniors. In that year, Oshawa's intermediate team won the Ontario championship.

In 1929, the club has some added strength. Charles McTavish became its president, and this was its greatest year. It won the Ontario senior championship, and then went on to win the Dominion Championship and the Mann Cup, defeating along the way Ottawa, Winnipeg, Edmonton and the famous 'Salmon Bellies' of New Westminster. In June 1930, as Canadian champions, the Oshawa team took part in the world championship tournament with a United States team, and won the world title by the margin 11 -10 in a two-game series.

In the 1930 season, the Brampton 'Excelsiors' eliminated Oshawa from the Ontario championship series. In 1931, at the peak of the depression, General Motors withdrew its support and the team was dismantled.