

Rowing in Canada Before The Founding of the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen

The First Regatta of the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen was held on August 4 and 5, 1880, on Toronto Bay. The CAAO had been founded only four months earlier on April 9, 1880.

Of course, there had been rowing races, regattas and rowing clubs before 1880. However, rowing in the nineteenth century had some major differences from what we are used to. The biggest difference was that almost without exception, races were held for prize money, hence the significance of the word “Amateur” in the name of the CAAO. Winners might collect as little as a few tens of dollars, up to several thousands of dollars, depending on who the competitors were. By far, Canada’s most successful professional sculler was Ned Hanlan. In his championship races, he collected no less than \$2,000 nine times, and \$5,000 three times. To put those numbers in context, a labourer in 1880 earned \$1.34 per 10-hour day, for an annual total of \$345. Hanlan would easily be in the same earnings class as the top professional athletes today.

Aside from the professional aspect of the sport in the nineteenth century, another major difference a modern spectator would notice would be the lengths of the races. Our standard 2,000 metre distance would be considered a sprint in the 1870s and 1880s. Using Ned Hanlan again to illustrate the point, when he won his first Championship of Canada in Toronto in 1877, he beat Wallace Ross over a five mile [8 km] distance. Six of his championship wins were over that distance. The shortest of his 15 championship races was two miles [3.2 km]. These races were not usually rowed straightaway, but with a turn, so that the competitors finished where they started.

One aspect of nineteenth century rowing that a modern competitor would feel familiar with would be the frequency of races. Every weekend after Queen Victoria’s birthday, May 24, there was at least one race somewhere. Some were informal one-time events, and some were regular regattas. The first *annual* regatta in what later became a part of Canada is believed to have been held in the harbour at St. John’s, Newfoundland, on September 22, 1818, to celebrate the 58th anniversary of the coronation of King George III. A decade later, the Royal St. John’s Regatta moved to Quidi Vidi Lake where it has stayed ever since. One of the first, if not *the* first regatta held in the United Province of Canada was on Toronto Bay, September 4 and 5, 1848. The Colony of Nova Scotia held an annual regatta for the championship of Halifax Harbour beginning in 1858. However, the first rowing race to be held in the Colony of Nova Scotia was in 1811 on Halifax Harbour, between soldiers from the Garrison, and sailors from the Royal Navy.

Singles and straight fours were the most popular boats, although, doubles, pairs, sixes - more popular in the United States than in Canada - eights and various in-rigged

Chapter 1: 1811 to 1879: Pre-CAAO Rowing in Canada

and lapstraked boats also competed regularly when there was another crew to race against and money to be won.

And where did that money come from? Competitors put up their own money, of course, but the best of the day had backers, who often formed clubs. These clubs were not what we think of when we hear the word. For instance, the Hanlan Club - not to be confused with the modern Hanlan B.C. - were a group of five men who financed Ned Hanlan's trips to the United States, and England. They also bought him the best equipment then available: an English shell with a sliding seat and swivel oarlocks. They put up the money for the races which Hanlan collected when he won, and they made side bets, the profits of which they shared. All the premier scullers of the day had clubs or syndicates backing them.

There was, however, another kind of club that we would find more familiar. In 1865, the Toronto Rowing Club was founded, although the nucleus of the club had been around since 1845. This club actually had a building on Tinning's Wharf at the foot of York St., but that's where the similarity to modern clubs ends. Robert Hunter explains:

Clubs in those days were merely convenient places for social gatherings, storing of boats, and depots from which to hold regattas. Boats were owned by the men who rowed in them. If you wished to form a crew, then the four of you went out to the builders and bought a skiff. Either that, or, if you were particularly clever with the hammer and saw, you made it yourselves. [Robert S. Hunter, *Rowing in Canada Since 1848* (Hamilton: Davis-Lisson, 1933) p.15]

Once a crew had a boat, if they needed a place to store it, they took it to a club.

Ned Hanlan may have been Canada's greatest, superstar sports hero of the nineteenth century, but he was not the first. In 1855, the "Superior" eight from Saint John, New Brunswick, beat an American eight in Boston. They were the first sweep oarsmen from a British colony to beat an American crew. They rowed an inrigged lapstrake over the 12 mile [19.3 km] course and took home \$2,000. [Hunter, p.13]

By far, the most famous rowers before Hanlan were a straight four, also from Saint John, New Brunswick. The crew was composed of lighthouse keeper Elijah Ross and three fishermen: George Price, Sam Hutton, and Robert Fulton. On July 7, 1867, while Canadians were celebrating Confederation, that four was competing at the Paris Exposition in France. Rowing on the Seine River, they beat three French crews, two English crews (one from the London R.C., the other from Oxford University), and a German crew to become world champions. They also won the inrigged four. For their accomplishments, they were dubbed "The Paris Crew." That same year, they also won a race in Indiantown, New Brunswick, and in 1868, they beat an American crew over a six mile [9.7 km] course at Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1869, they won races in Toronto and on the Niagara River. They lost to an English crew at Lachine, Quebec in 1870, thus missing out on the £500 prize, but beat another English crew on August 23, 1871 over a six mile [9.7 km] course on the Kennebecasis River in New Brunswick, cheered on by a crowd estimated to be 20,000 to 25,000 strong. That victory was diminished by the fact that the stroke of the English four, world champion sculler, James Renforth, collapsed

Chapter 1: 1811 to 1879: Pre-CAAO Rowing in Canada

during the race and later died of an apparent heart attack in a home along the river to which he had been carried. The Paris Crew won again in 1873, however, disagreement over the ownership of their boat sowed discontent in the crew, and in their last race together, they lost badly to a crew from Halifax at the 1876 Centennial Regatta in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, over a three mile [4.8 km] course on the Schuylkill River, the same event, where, coincidentally, Ned Hanlan won his first international race and began his rise as a rowing superstar.

However, the success of the Paris Crew had united the new country perhaps as much or more than the British North America Act.

Above, I stated that the crowd who witnessed the race between the Paris Crew and the English crew on the Kennebecasis River in 1871 numbered 20,000 to 25,000. Those two numbers come from two different sources; one says 20,000 and the other says 25,000. Estimating crowd size is not a science. However, nineteenth century newspapers and magazines were fond of giving crowd size numbers to help their readers visualize the scene, and we, more than a century later should not disregard them, nor should we take them literally. Clearly, the crowd at that race was huge. And when Hunter, using contemporary news reports as his source, says that when Ned Hanlan returned to Toronto after his first big win at the Centennial Regatta in 1876 on the S.S. *City of Toronto*, “the whole town, men, women and children clogged the waters and bay front to join in the reception and pay tribute to the now-famous sculler,” [Hunter, p.28] we should not accuse him of hyperbole and ignore what he says, but accept the gist of the statement, that an immense crowd was on hand. To win the Canadian championship and the \$1,000 prize in 1877, Hanlan beat Wallace Ross over five miles [8 km] with a turn before 25,000 spectators on Toronto Bay; yet another huge crowd. Large crowds were the norm whenever Hanlan competed. Clearly, thanks to the successes of the Superior eight, the Paris Crew, and especially Ned Hanlan, rowing was arguably the most popular spectator sport in Canada in the nineteenth century. As a consequence, young men across the country were being drawn to the sport.

Ned Hanlan’s contribution to the surge in popularity of rowing was recognized by his contemporaries. In a tribute to Hanlan, his doubles partner, John Joseph Ryan, from the Bayside R.C., observed that the CAAO’s foundation “is due directly and absolutely to the vast public interest he created in rowing.” [*Outdoor Canada*, February, 1908]

Because professional rowing was so popular, mixed amateur and professional regattas co-existed, with the professional races featuring big names and/or purses being used to attract spectators.

Here is a description of one such event, the first Barrie Regatta of August, 1878:

THE BARRIE REGATTA.

Wind and weather favored all those interested in the regatta held on Kempenfeldt Bay, at Barrie, Ont., Aug. 12, 13, and it proved so great a success that those who projected and carried it through will doubtless make another effort in the same direction next season. The first race, for amateur four-oared crews, two miles straightaway, was started shortly after four o'clock. It was an interesting contest, the boats being close together all the way, and the Leanders of Hamilton winning by a length from the Toronto Rowing Club, who were passed by the Argonauts of Toronto. A local double-scutt race followed, two miles with a turn, a crew from up the lake winning with ease, beating two Barrie crews. An amateur scullers' race followed, two miles with a turn, J. Phillips of Toronto defeating Roger Lamb of same place. Then came the chief event of the regatta—the race between E. Hanlan, Wallace Ross, Eph. Morris, G. H. Hosmer, P. Luther, F. A. Plaisted, Coulter, W. McKen, E. Ross and A. Elliott; distance, four miles with a turn, for money prizes. Wallace Ross led until the turning buoys were neared, when Hanlan spurted from second place to the front, after which the race was never in doubt (indeed it had not been at any time), Hanlan easily keeping well ahead and crossing the line with an advantage of several lengths; Ross second, Hosmer third, Luther fourth, McKen fifth, Elliott sixth, Plaisted seventh. Unofficial time, 28m. 12s. A double-scutt inrigged boat-race followed, a mile and return, Plaisted and mate winning, Gardner Bro.'s second. Time, 16m. 46s. Consolation scullers' race, four miles with a turn—F. A. Plaisted, 1; P. Luther, 2; W. McKen, 3; Ed. Ross, 4; A. Elliott, 5; Coulter, 6. Morris did not start. Unofficial time, 29m. 36s., and 29m. 59s.

[reproduced from the Hanlan scrapbook courtesy of Edward English]

There were three preliminary amateur races, followed by the "chief event," featuring ten professional scullers, racing for a prize of \$500. This was the reason that a special train from Toronto had brought hundreds of spectators to the shores of Kempenfeldt Bay.

Chapter 1: 1811 to 1879: Pre-CAAO Rowing in Canada

While the professionals attracted large crowds, and inspired young men to take up the sport, because money, sometime very large sums of money, was involved, problems arose.

Two stories involving Ned Hanlan will illustrate some of what went on in the world of professional sculling. The stories are not unique; I mention them because the events have been frequently written about.

In the spring of 1879, Hanlan had been competing in England. After the sea voyage home, he was out of shape. The town of Barrie had invited him to race James H. Riley, an American, at the second Barrie Regatta, and Hanlan, against his better judgement agreed. Part way down the course, he stopped and could not finish, but Riley refused to cross the finish line. The speculation was that Riley had placed bets on Hanlan to win, and he would have lost his money if *he* won. The race was judged a draw and a re-row was ordered, but Hanlan refused and forfeited the prize money. It was a major disappointment to the 20,000 fans who were there to watch Hanlan beat Riley. As a footnote, in a rematch, on May 26, on the Potomac River, Hanlan did just that, by a quarter of a mile [402.3 metres]. Presumably, Riley bet on Hanlan to win that race too.

The second anecdote has to do with a proposed series of three races between Charles E. Courtney and Ned Hanlan. The first was held at Lachine, Quebec. on October 3, 1878. It was five miles [8 km] with a prize of a staggering \$8,000 (although one source says \$10,000) which Hanlan won. The second race was to be held at Union Springs, New York on Lake Chataqua the following year. Some time before that race, Hanlan was made aware of a scheme concocted between his and Courtney's backers. They had planned that Hanlan would win the first race, let Courtney win the second, then Hanlan would win the third. Hanlan refused to throw the race at Union Springs although he was offered a bribe to do so. As a consequence, just before the race, Courtney's boat was found sawed completely in two. He could not compete. There was speculation that Courtney had done the deed himself, but his trainer was ultimately blamed. Courtney's syndicate obviously had a lot to lose if he raced and lost. The referee ordered the race to proceed, but Courtney refused to use his second shell or a borrowed one, so Hanlan rowed the five-mile [8 km] course alone. The Hop Bitters Company that put up the \$6,000 prize, refused to pay. The following May, on the Potomac River, the race was re-rowed. Hanlan won and collected the \$6,000. [For a thorough, meticulously-researched account of the Hanlan-Courtney races, see William Lanouette, *The Triumph of the Amateurs* (Latham: Lyons Press, 2021) pp.141-158]

With prize money like that at stake, it is not surprising that abuses occurred. The Courtney-Hanlan fiasco, plus a long list of other Courtney shenanigans, including fake illnesses and imaginary problems on courses, prompted 10 of the premier professional scullers of the day to issue a public complaint in the *New York Times*. Because Courtney "has done so much to disgrace professional sculling," they pledged never to row with or against Courtney. [The *New York Times*, July 13, 1884] Ned Hanlan did not sign the pledge because he was in Australia racing for the sixth time for the world sculling championship.

Chapter 1: 1811 to 1879: Pre-CAAO Rowing in Canada

Readers interested in finding out more about the shady side of professional rowing should read *The Triumph of the Amateurs*, by William Lanouette, mentioned above.

In this murky atmosphere, we should not be surprised that a group of rowing supporters who wanted to promote the sport in its purest form would organize an association of amateurs. That is what happened in 1880.

In response to the popularity of the sport, several amateur clubs were formed. The Toronto R.C. was established in 1865. In 1880, it moved to sumptuously large quarters half a block east from the foot of Scott St. to the foot of Church St.. The Ottawa R.C. had been around since 1867, and could boast of having Sir John A. MacDonald as their President in 1869. On June 22, 1872, the Argonaut R.C. was founded along the lines of English clubs with the aim of providing facilities and equipment for amateurs. Its second, third and fourth clubhouses were located near Tinning's Wharf at the foot of York St., four blocks west of the Toronto R.C.. The first Argonaut President was Henry O'Brien, who would also be the first President of the Canadian Association of Amateur Oarsmen. The Leander R.C. began in 1877, and another Hamilton club, the Nautilus R.C. began the following year. Also in 1878, the Don Amateur R.C. was founded. The newspaper article describing the 1878 Barrie Regatta which is reproduced above mentions an amateur four from the Toronto R.C., and two Barrie doubles, so there must have been some activity there. Regatta records for 1879 mention a straight four from Peterborough and a double from the Port Huron R.C..

In Quebec, the Lachine Boating Club had been founded in 1863 and the Grand Trunk R.C. located in Montreal, in 1878.

The time was ripe to form an association of amateur oarsmen.

PLEASE NOTE: This History is a work in progress. I will post chapters as I finish them and I will make changes to chapters which are already posted as I become aware of new information, or have errors pointed out to me. This version was completed on August 26, 2022. If you find errors or omissions, use the Contact link at <http://goldmedalphotos.com/> to point them out to me. Stan Lapinski.