

2008 Excelsior Program Article

Brampton Excelsiors: Over 125 Years of Lacrosse Excellence

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Lacrosse in Brampton has had a rich and enduring history. Building on Canada's aboriginal roots, lacrosse emerged in Brampton in the 1870s and has become an important ingredient of Brampton's distinctive character.

In 1974, the Excelsior Lacrosse Club Executive recognized 1883 as the official date for the establishment of the Excelsior Lacrosse Club. This year was selected given its solidification as a community organization and its entry into the newly established provincial lacrosse champions' schedule.

The Early Years

Brampton is viewed as both a "cradle and nursery" for the development of lacrosse in Ontario and indeed, Canada. The Excelsior Lacrosse Club holds the enviable legacy of being the longest-running amateur community-owned sports franchise in Canada, perhaps in North America.

Perkins Bull, author of *From Rattlesnake Hunt To Hockey: The History of Sports in Canada and of the Sportsmen of Peel, 1798 to 1934*, wrote that while it was Harry W. Dawson who brought "the first stick into Brampton," the "first regular play began in 1871" when George M. Lee, second Master in the Brampton High School, initiated the first organized game. At Lee's suggestion it is reported that the "Excelsior" name from Longfellow's poem was introduced and the legend was set in motion.

The Excelsiors' first win came in June 1871 against the Second Twelve of the Ontario Club at the Fair Grounds of the Peel Agricultural Society in Brampton (where the current Lorne Scots building stands on Chapel Street). The first Excelsiors included John Jerman Manning, G.H. Smith, David Trueman Lowes, Joseph Tilt, Wesley Craig, Hector McTavish, George Walker, Robert and James A. Morton, Archibald and Neil McKechnie, John Watson, and goaltender, Alex Watson.

A second Brampton team emerged at the time in opposition to the young Excelsiors. Known as the "Eurekas", a group of clerks from downtown Brampton set up a team led by Tom Ash, Will Woods, the Ballentynes, and others with the purpose of "taking the youngsters down a peg". The team was never quite able to defeat the young Excels. Lacrosse flourished in Brampton at the time and was a principal attraction, with many memorable contests taking place. During the early 1880s, the Excelsior Lacrosse Club continued to grow. A Senior league was organized across Ontario and a series of provincial district championship schedules were arranged. The Senior Excelsiors won the Ontario Western District Championship in 1881, 1882 and 1883, defeating such teams from Guelph, Elora, Mount Forest, Fergus, Orangeville, Milton, Stratford, St. Mary's, Listowel and Harriston. The second generation of prominent Excelsiors emerged during this time including Samuel Charters, Richard Blain, T.W. Duggan, Leonard Suggitt, George Sinclair, George Beck and Albert Hill. A Junior team, known as the 'Athletics', was established during this period and played Georgetown, Milton, Orangeville and a number of teams from Toronto. In 1907, the team took on the official Excelsior name too.

For the next twenty years lacrosse grew rapidly across Ontario and other parts of Canada. In 1887, the Canadian Lacrosse Association (CLA) was formed and Ontario's Senior league further solidified. Lacrosse honours returned to Brampton as the Intermediate Excelsiors captured the Ontario Intermediate Championship in 1893 and 1894. Many viewed this as being one of the strongest teams to come out of Brampton in its short lacrosse history and it included many future prominent Bramptonians, including Dr. J.G. Roberts (O.A.L.A. president), J.R. Fallis (M.P.P. for Peel), D.L. Heggie, (surgeon in Brampton), the Peaker brothers (dentists). In 1895 they were finalists in the Senior Series defeating St.

Catharines in the semi-final but losing to Seaforth in the final.

Prominent Excelsior teams continued to emerge and develop at the turn of the century. In 1912 and 1913, both the Junior and Senior teams won the Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association Championships. The Senior Excelsiors went on to capture Ontario's Globe Shield again in 1914, but were unsuccessful in their bid for the Mann Cup. Some of the key players included H. Campbell, G. Williams, C. Mulliss, F. Beecham, P. Warr, Roswell I. Blain, W. Stevens, G. Sproule, W.K. Mara, H. Sproule, A.G. Davis, C.V. Charters, J. Roberts, M. Ashley, and N. Anderson. In 1922, the Brampton Junior team won their first Junior Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association Championship and the Iroquois Cup, defeating Shelburne. In 1926, the Senior team captured the Dominion Championship, defeating Weston.

Excelsiors' First Mann Cup, 1930

The Senior Excels won the Senior O.A.L.A. Championship and the Globe Shield before going on to compete for, and win, the Mann Cup, the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association's (CALA) top honour. Coached by Eddie Powers, Brampton defeated the Eastern Canadian Champions from Montreal in the semifinals, before going on to defeat the New Westminster Salmonbellies in a three game series at Varsity Stadium.

George Sproule, long time star of the Excelsiors, was selected winner of the Murphy Memorial trophy. This award was given to the team's the most valuable and sportsmanlike contestant of the season in the Ontario Lacrosse Association. His Excelsior teammates included Ollie Burton, Stew Beatty, Harold 'Mooney' Gibson, Bert Large, Jerry Kendall, George Thompson, William O'Hearn, Albert Burry, De Forest Wilson, Ed Reeves, Cecil Stapleton, Norm Zimmer, Ernest Gowdy, Pete Ella, Elgin Core, Claude Jennings, and Lambert Powell.

The Mann Cup was not the only lacrosse honour that found its way to Brampton in 1930. 1930 was a banner year for the Intermediate and Junior Excelsiors too. The Juniors won the provincial Iroquois Cup for

the second time while the Excelsior Intermediates captured the La Fortuna Cup for the fifth time (also won in 1890, 1893, 1894 and 1924). In 1931, the Senior Excelsiors' added another Mann Cup to the collection, defeating the New Westminster Salmonbellies for the second consecutive year.

Brampton's lacrosse history took a big shift in the 1930s. Rosalea Park emerged as Brampton's designated lacrosse grounds, the result of a generous donation by the Jennings family. Brampton also witnessed the emergence of box lacrosse with the building of Brampton's first outdoor box lacrosse bowl, the Rose Bowl at Rosalea Park (where Brampton's tennis courts are currently situated). It wasn't uncommon to have 4,000 spectators at a Saturday afternoon game as the town virtually came to stand still.

Brampton's third Mann Cup came in 1942 when the Mimico-Brampton Combines defeated the New Westminster Salmonbellies at Maple Leaf Gardens. This was Brampton's first box lacrosse Mann Cup championship. Goalie Bert Large won the Mike Kelly Award as the outstanding player during the series. In 1943 the Combines won the provincial title but were unable to repeat their national championship honours, this time losing to the Salmonbellies.

Minor lacrosse had existed in Brampton from the turn of the century under the auspices of various local organizations. In 1943 the Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association (BMLA) was formed, under the leadership of Dr. Ken Hall with Walter Smart as the league manager. In 1946, the BMLA officially entered the Ontario Minor Lacrosse Association (OMLA). E.W. 'Billy' Evans, George 'Mush' Thompson, Stew Beatty, Jim Clevely, Walter Smart, Lloyd 'Baldy' Ewles, and many others guided this next stage of lacrosse development in Brampton.

Excelsiors' First Minto Cup, 1952

Championship fever took over Brampton again in 1952 as the Junior Excelsiors won

their first Minto Cup competition. The Junior Excelsiors, coached by Carl Madgett, defeated New Westminster in the championship. Jack Bionda, a Huntsville native, played for Brampton that year and later emerged as one of the game's all time greats. Players on Brampton's first Minto Cup team also included B. McLaughlin, J. Sibbald, Jim Dodds, J. Caruso, K. Woods, L. Smith, G. Laidlaw, B. Watson, D. Kearney, J. Hillson, G. Savage, J. McCann, P. Bradkin, C. Armstrong, A. Archdekin, and B. Russell.

A second outdoor lacrosse box for Brampton's youngest players was built in 1952 replacing the original one (on the current site of the YMCA in Rosalea Park). Little did lacrosse builders know that they were laying the foundation for future Brampton's supremacy in Junior lacrosse and the emergence of Excelsior greats like the Thompson brothers (Jim, Gord, and Wayne), Bert Naylor, Bruce Wanless, Don Arthurs, John Ford, John McCauley, Dave and Bram Wilfong and many others who would contribute to Brampton's many lacrosse successes during this period.

The Junior Lacrosse Excelsior teams in the late 1950s, coached by George 'Mush' Thompson, dominated lacrosse in Canada, winning four Eastern Canadian Junior Championships from 1956 to 1959 and three consecutive Minto Cup Canadian Championships, from 1957 to 1959. The 1958 Minto Cup team went unbeaten in the Ontario semi-finals, the Ontario finals and the Canadian Championship series. The 1959 Excelsiors had eight rookies on the team including fourteen-year-old John McCauley, the youngest player to play on a Canadian Lacrosse Championship Team, a CLA record. Excelsior players who played for all three Minto Cup teams included Bob Savage, Bob McClure, Dave Beatty, Bert Naylor, Wayne Thompson and Bruce Wanless.

Many players and builders from these Championship teams received various honours for their achievements. Harry Benham, George "Mush" Thompson, Wayne Thompson and Bruce Wanless were later inducted into the Canadian Lacrosse Association Hall of Fame (CLAHF), the

Ontario Lacrosse Association Hall of Fame (OLAHF) and the Brampton Sports Hall of Fame (BSHOF). Don Arthurs, Pat Baker and Bert Naylor were inducted into both the CLAHF and the OLAHF. John McCauley was inducted into the OLAHF and BSHOF. Jack Madgett was inducted into the OLAHF. Herb Armstrong, Dave Beatty, Carl Madgett, Bruce McClure and Gord Thompson were inducted into the BSHOF.

Lacrosse during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s continued to flourish in Brampton. Memorial Arena on Elliot Street became the preferred Excelsior home although the Junior teams played in Bramalea for a brief period. The Major Excelsiors, for a short period, decided not to operate in 1974 following the formation of the professional National Lacrosse League as the pro league depleted the Excelsior line-up. Brampton players went on to play for the Toronto Tomahawks, Philadelphia Wings, Rochester Griffins, Maryland Arrows, Montreal Quebecois and Syracuse Stingers.

The Senior Excelsiors' captured the provincial crown in 1962, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, and 1981 and brought home the Mann Cup home for one more visit in 1980. 1972 witnessed a Senior B Brampton Excelsior team win the Presidents Cup, defeating the New Westminster Blues. The Junior Excels captured the provincial crown in 1963 and 1976 but national honours continued to elude them. Jr. B and Jr. C teams existed in Brampton intermittently during this time, with the Jr. C Excelsiors capturing the provincial crown in 1980.

Many Excelsior players gained personal recognition during this period. Bruce Wanless (1967), Bob Burke (1980), Phil Scarphone (1984) received the league's most valuable player honours in the Major Series lacrosse. Don Arthurs (1964), Tom Patrick (1976), Steve Mastine (1977), and Phil Scarphone (1984) received the leagues leading scorer awards in Major Series lacrosse. Gray Drysdale (1975) received the Harry Lumley Trophy for top goaltending. Bruce Wanless (1970) and Randy Novak (1986) received the Merv McKenzie Trophy for the league's most valuable defensive player. During the same era, Gary Drysdale (1963), Larry Smeltzer (1972), Bob Burke

(1974), Gary Walker (1983), Rick Mang (1985) and Jim Veltman (1987) captured the most valuable player award in the Jr. A League.

Excelsior lacrosse builders received a number of provincial honours too. Bill Evans (1961), Herb Armstrong (1965), Bruno Ohmann (1971), Harry Benham (1982), Everett Coates (1983), and Dean McLeod (1985) were recipients of various provincial awards. Burke and Mastine went on to play on Canada's World Field Lacrosse Championship team that defeated the U.S. in 1978, along with John McCauley who served as assistant coach. In the 1980 Mann Cup championship against New Westminster, Brampton goaltender Barry Maruk was named the Mann Cup Series most valuable player in 1980 and winner of the Mike Kelly Award.

The Rich Heritage Continues

For the last two decades, lacrosse in Brampton has continued to gain momentum as revealed by a flourishing minor program and a very successful Major program. As the new professional league established itself, the Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association also witnessed an upsurge in growth during the 1990s, with over 1000 players, under the leadership of Tony Bennett with the usual suspects, Kevin Board, Reg Ewles, Paul Gilkinson, Doug Whillans, Stu Neil and many others.

During this time, Brampton experienced the play of some of the world's best teams and greatest players and coaches. Seven provincial Majors championship (1992, 1993, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003) and 4 Canadian Mann Cup championships (1992, 1993, 1998, 2002) found their way back to Brampton during this time. Jim Veltman, Gary Walker, Troy Cordingley, Dan Teat, John Tavares, Pat O'Toole, Josh Sanderson, Steve Dietrich, Bob Watson, Brandon Miller, Tom Phair, Pat and Mike Coyle, Mike Hasen, Jim Moss, Terry Sanderson, and Les Wakeling were only a few of the significant contributors connected with these great teams. The Jr. Excels captured the provincial crown in 1994 but were unable to bring the Minto home.

Today, this rich heritage continues. The

Excelsior Lacrosse Club, under the leadership Ziggy Musial, continues to operate highly successful Junior A, Major, Masters, and Senior Men's Field programs. Brampton Minor Lacrosse, with its early origins in the 1930s, has grown to become one of the largest lacrosse associations in Canada. Brampton offers recreational and representative Lacrosse programs in box and field lacrosse for over 1000 both boys and girls aged 5 to 21 in our city. High schools have also become more active participants in the sport and no less than 14 secondary schools in the Peel region now boast field lacrosse programs.

Zeny Lipinski, VP for the Excelsior Juniors, is optimistic about his team's chances this year. The team, he reports, will be very competitive. The team is made up of many players who have successfully played together from a young age. In 2003, this core group made up the Brampton Midget A team that won the provincial and Canadian field lacrosse championship and have been important contributors in Brampton's playoff berth in Jr. A lacrosse these last few years. Many on the team are also playing in both Canadian and American college and university field programs. 2007 Jr. A 'coach of the year' Brian Beisel and his staff return again this season to move the team toward that one trophy that has continued to elude a visit Brampton.

Tomm Brannon, VP for the Excelsior Majors, is feeling very positive about his team's chances too. Last year's squad had the most stringent and aggressive defense in the league with the Mattamy Homes sponsored tandem of Miller and Cosmo winning the league's goaltending award. This year, with the return of Dan Dawson and Colin Doyle, the offensive arsenal will be strengthened, and this Brampton team he believes has what it takes to bring the Mann back to Brampton.

For over 125 years, lacrosse in Brampton has provided us with a rich legacy and many memories. For the youth of our community, lacrosse has nurtured not only the skills to play the "fastest game on two feet" but also the skills of team play and sportsmanship. It has provided both girls and boys with the opportunity to play Canada's national

summer sport, and for some, an opportunity to pursue their passion for the sport at the provincial and national levels and at Canadian and American universities. For the community, lacrosse has provided an important venue for some very exciting sports entertainment. Perhaps, more importantly, it has provided opportunities for youth, parents, citizens and corporate partners to contribute to the common goal of building the “healthy and caring” community we know as Brampton.

Please note: Information for this article originates from various news clippings written by Brampton sports writers’ Jimmy Burrell, Ken ‘Scoop’ Giles, Jack Campbell, John McGhie, and Al Best. Other sources include: Bull, Wm., Perkins (1934) *From*

Rattlesnake Hunt To Hockey: The History of Sports in Canada and of the Sportsmen of Peel, 1798 to 1934. Toronto: The Perkins Bull Foundation George J. McLeod Ltd.; Burrell, Jimmy (1930) *Souvenir and Historical Sketch, Brampton Championship Lacrosse Teams.* Brampton: Copeland-Chatterson Limited; Davidson, Donald, J. (1964) *Brampton: Then and Now*; Giles, K. (1883) *Memories of lacrosse in Brampton.* The Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club Special Commemorative Issue; Ontario Lacrosse Association (2006) *Champions & Award Winners of the Ontario Lacrosse Association, 1887-2006.* Ontario Lacrosse Association; *Thistles Forever Lacrosse History, Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century.* A Society for Canadian Lacrosse Research.