

"Hockey in Canada — the way it is!"

A different kind of sports book

by Earle McCurdy

Over the years, books written by or about professional athletes tended to be of the "From Ghetto to Glory" type of corny yarn with big type and lots of photographs, but with precious little of consequence to say, and with no attempt at critical analysis of the professional sports setup. To talk about a good sports book was almost a contradiction in terms.

In the last year or two, however, there has been evidence to suspect that the athletes are beginning to develop an interest for "telling it like it is." By no means the least notable of this new breed of sports book is Brian Conacher's "Hockey in Canada — the way it is!"

Conacher is one of a very small number of players who have played in both the Olympic Games and the Stanley Cup finals, in addition to playing junior and college hockey, so his background is obviously considerable.

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The big villain of Conacher's piece is the National Hockey League. "From a businessman's point of view," he says, "what could be better than some six men controlling every boy who plays hockey in North America."

"The very rigidity of the N.H.L. structure and its inability and resistance to change was to be the very essence of its vulnerability to outside forces. But the leaders of professional hockey have been so blinded to everything but their success, and so oblivious to other people's needs, particularly hockey players, that change during the sixties has taken on the character of revolution, rather than the evolution that could have produced meaningful changes without resentment."

At this point you might say, "Hmmm, this sounds like what's going on everywhere, not just in hockey." And that is precisely the point that Conacher makes when he says, "But the forces of change that are taking place in hockey today are not a thing apart from our deeper social changes, and so the N.H.L. is destined to lose any desperate confrontation they wage to preserve the archaic structure that has made a few men so materially wealthy."

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Conacher's biggest complaint about the existing hockey structure is that it is virtually impossible to combine hockey and education. Father David Bauer, who organized and coached Canada's national team in 1963, has the attitude that the growth of hockey in conjunction with education is more important than just winning, and Conacher reflects this attitude. He elaborates on his condemnation of pro hockey owners: "Father Bauer was a

threat to the pros because he was talking a language they did not understand and did not want to because they could not see how it could make them money. Because the N.H.L. could not understand what the national team was trying to do, and we know what influence a word from the N.H.L. can mean as an authority on hockey, they tried, and fairly successfully, to sink this new ship before it ever set sail."

Conacher does not blame the N.H.L. entirely for the flaws in Canada's Hockey set-up. He also blames educational institutions, particularly universities: "It appeared to me that the school system would never take the lead in trying to solve the problem that potentially confronted some 300,000 young people of school age who played hockey in Canada."

If Conacher is bitter about the hockey structure in Canada, he is even more bitter about his experience in

professional hockey. His manager and coach in the two years that he played in the N.H.L. was Punch Imlach, and Conacher pulls no punches in giving his opinion of the controversial Imlach. His commentary on contract squabbles with Imlach goes on at some length, but his most damning comments are on Imlach's methods and attitudes as a coach, and the following comments are just a sampling:

"Ham-strings, groin injuries, sprains, didn't matter a bit. George (Imlach) drove the machine full throttle right from the beginning. The veterans knew how to pace themselves. They knew that in six weeks they were going to get in shape, so why kill yourself for someone else's ego. Imlach always seemed to sense this attitude however, and it only possessed him to drive even harder. It was hard to knock his methods, and I certainly didn't then, in the light of three successive Stanley

Cups, but the method had within it the eventual destruction of the morale of the Leaf team."

"I think he (Imlach) would have passed up a Bobby Orr rather than live with a player whom he thought, or the public thought, had bettered him at the bargaining table."

"Punch was in the tradition of every other coach I had been exposed to in pro hockey. Their job was one of team supervision, enforcing regulations, discipline, training, answering the news media, and changing lines. Imlach's strength lay in being a good strategist, an effective manipulator of players and a good man with a hunch. To my mind a coach he was not."

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Just as damning as Conacher's commentary on Imlach is his report on the political environment of the world "amateur" hockey championships, which was so blatant that one year the president of the International Ice Hockey Federation — the governing body of the championships — hugged the Russian coach after Russia won the gold medal. Conacher slashes at the refereeing in the international matches:

"The European referee is not handling the game because he is a competent referee; he's there because of political connections. Unfortunately, Canada is the only country from which he doesn't have to worry about repercussions if he offends us. Also, European referees enjoy the trips and they would far rather have ineffective Canada mad at them than powerhouse Russian, under whose hand they could be blackballed from any assignments at a future tournament."

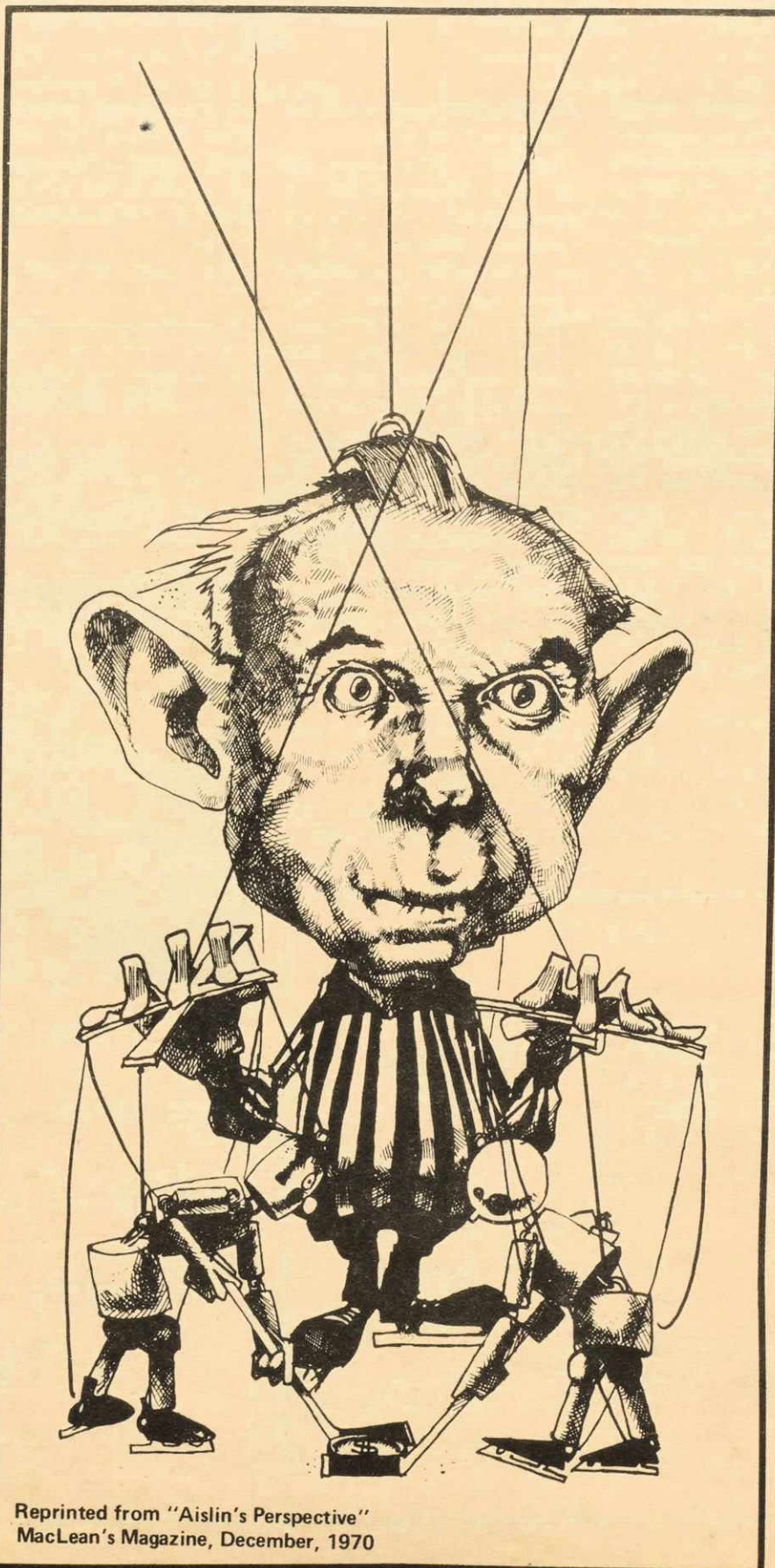
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The political tension at these international games is so tense that Conacher says he did not feel as much pressure in pro hockey as he had in the Olympics until the last game of the 1967 Stanley Cup finals.

Conacher concludes his book with a series of recommendations on how hockey in Canada could be improved, both in play and in structure, and he has some sound recommendations there.

On the whole, the book is well worth reading, as it points out the exploitation of professional hockey players that is so typical of the manipulation of workers in other lines of work. Even a person with no interest in sports would be able to identify with this book. There is a bit of the usual description of games and so on that it is not too exciting, but Conacher keeps that sort of thing to a bare minimum, so what the book boils down to is not a story about a hockey player, but an intelligent and informed commentary on what is often called "Canada's national game."

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