

Olympians

The Canadian Olympic tradition continues

By "HOWIE" MARR

Every four years, countries from across the world come together to compete in the Olympic games, giving people a chance to express their national pride. Canada is no exception. Ever since capturing its first gold medal in 1904, Canada has taken great pride in its performance at the games. This summer in Seoul will be no different. Canada has an opportunity to field one of its most successful teams ever, and York athletes will be playing an integral role in the quest for medals.

York University is fortunate to have among its faculty a noted expert in the field of Canadian olympians. Frank Cosentino, a physical education professor at York, is author of *Olympic Gold*, which traces Canada's involvement in the Olympic games.

As Cosentino explains it, Canada's involvement in the Olympics can be specifically divided into two periods consisting of, the pre-1952 and post-1952 eras.

Canada won its first gold in the Olympics in the 1904 games. The Winnipeg Shamrocks lacross victory at the St. Louis games was Canada's

ment." As a result, Canadian athletes constituted only those who could afford to go. After all, to compete in the Olympics an athlete had to take off time from work.

One of the most famous stories of underfunded athletes was that of marathoner Billy Sherring, who won the gold in 1906, in Athens. Sherring was one of three prominent Hamilton athletes who the city decided they would sponsor. However, a proposal to raise the money by way of a civic fund was denied by City Council, and a public concert was held instead. But only \$75.00 was raised, not enough to get to Athens!

As luck would have it, or rather an inside tip, Sherring bet the \$75.00 on a horse that paid six to one. Sherring's horse came in and he was off to Athens, albeit not exactly in first-class conditions. Sherring ended up taking third-class accommodations on a cattle boat destined for Athens. However, it didn't end there. Sherring's accommodations in Athens included sleeping on an old barn floor, but such was the commitment of the early Canadian athlete.

Upon his return to Canada, Sherring became a national hero and was showered with gifts. Most of Canada's participants in the Olympics, like Sherring, were of British decent. "Most of the immigrants were carving out a living at the time," said Cosentino. While most of the Canadian athletes were British in the early Olympics, there was also something else noticeable about them. They were all men as well. It was not until 1928 that women began to compete in the Olympics and Canada subsequently sent over its first contingent of women.

The 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam were marked by a controversy over whether to include women in the games. The Pope had condemned the idea of including women in the track and field events, because "The events, especially the 800m run were not suitable for women." The International Olympic Association decided to take the issue to a vote, and it passed with a majority, despite some stern opposition that included Canada. Ethel Catherwood of Saskatchewan emerged with the gold in the high jump, despite her country's opposition. It has been a long climb for female athletes, from a public's reluctance to allow them to compete in a 800m run, to women competing in the 1984 Olympic marathon in Los Angeles.

The next big milestone in Olympic history took place at the 1952 games. The 1952 games in Helsinki served as the watershed point for what was to become the post World War II era. The significant fact about the post-1952 era was that the eastern-bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, began to compete in the games. Previously, the games had been dominated by Western countries only. The appearance of the Soviets turned the games into political warfare during the cold war period. It is an atmosphere that has not escaped the Olympics since, as is exemplified by the major boycotts of the last two summer games, held in the Soviet Union and the United States.

The appearance of the Soviets at the games brought a new attitude as to how athletes were to be funded. The Soviets funded their athletes through

the state, while athletes from Canada were still being funded privately. The Olympics fit neatly into the cold war of the 1950s, and the games began to take on a US vs. USSR flavour. As the Soviets and Americans began to compete, the commercially financed Canadian squads began to garner fewer medals.

However, panic did not seem to beset the Canadian squad until they lost in hockey for the first time to the Soviets in 1954. There was a tremendous uproar that included Conn Smythe promising to send over the Leafs to restore Canadian pride. The end result of the Canadian losses in hockey, as well as a continuing diminution of gold medals, was the creation of a task force to look into the issue.

In 1968 the federal government set up a task force to look into Canadian sport. The findings of the task force led to a complete restructuring of Canada's approach to sport. Prior to the task force the theory was to encourage mass participation and consequently draw athletes from a large pool. After the report government not only encouraged mass participation, but also tried to cultivate elite athletes. The result was programmes such as carded athletes, which allows for certain athletes, who are ranked high in their sport, to be eligible for government grants. In addition, organizations such as Sport Canada and the National Centre for Administration of Sport came about as a result of the task force. The provinces also followed suit, with each province creating its own organization such as a Sport Ontario.

The Canadian approach to Olympic sports was also helped along by the high profile of the Montreal summer Olympic games. Although the awarding of the games was essentially tied to a civic effort, it did not prevent national interest in the Olympics. After the 1976 games a lot of people in Canada wanted to keep the country's success going. Included in new approaches was early identification of athletes and a new commitment to coaching. The 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles saw Canada receive its greatest amount of Olympic medals ever. And while the cynic might point to the noticeable absence of the Soviet bloc,



Running The Last Lap: Billy Sherring was one of Canada's first gold medal winners. The shamrock-clad athlete used his Irish luck to place a bet that paid his way to Athens. Running beside Sherring is the monitor for the marathon race.

the Canadian effort showed how far Canada had come in comparison to the rest of the West.

The success of the Calgary winter games is almost sure to continue this trend. It might be argued that Canada won few medals, but the games were a success commercially. Because Canada is a country that is often associated with winter the theory is that we should excel at the winter games. However, this reasoning is flawed, because of the heavy costs that go hand in hand with winter sports. Canada has traditionally lacked many of the facilities required for competition in the winter. The Calgary speed skating oval is only the second in the world. And while cross country skiing does have a wide base of participants, Canadians don't necessarily have a cultural identity with the sport. In fact, Canada's success in downhill skiing is more a function of athletes competing on the European tour than the Canadian climate. Figure skating is another example of an expensive winter sport, and consequently it is con-

sidered somewhat elite. Of course in hockey, Canada places itself at a disadvantage by not sending over its professional athletes.

In essence, summer sports are simply cheaper to participate in than their winter counterparts. In Cosentino's words, "A pair of shoes and shorts and an athlete is ready to compete." This once again brings to the forefront the issue of whether state involvement is necessary for sport. The pressure is on Western governments, including Canada, to sponsor athletes to compete against Eastern bloc countries in the ideological warfare of the Olympics. The perfect example of a country successfully mobilizing its athletes is East Germany. With a relatively small population and economic base, the East Germans have been able to dominate at the Olympics. Canada is not the only country suffering from Eastern domination. The American failures at the recent winter games have resulted in George Steinbrenner being appointed to a committee to look into the American programme.

Canada would receive a big boost if the 1996 games were awarded to Toronto and unlike Montreal, the federal and provincial governments have both shown their support financially.

York University could become a focal point of any Toronto-held Olympics. The university has already been the beneficiary of a top track and field facility. Cosentino feels that top notch facilities are paramount to attracting athletes to York. It is these type of facilities that are needed to nurture competitive athletes in Canada.

The essential problems that seems to pervade any attempt to increase athletic support is a basic question of ideology. While the Soviets and East Germans have no problems with funding their athletes through public money, the idea does not hold as much water in Canada and the United States. "In the East the Olympics have become a science while Canadians are not ready to spend the same money and take the same liberties as the Soviets," says Cosentino.



Ethel Catherwood: 1928 marked the first year women competed. Catherwood won the gold in the high jump.

first; previously the closest Canada had come to a gold medal win was when Toronto-born George Orton won the 2500m steeplechase, but Orton was representing the United States. Lacrosse was considered to be Canada's answer to winning a gold, but the hitch was that only amateurs were allowed to compete. The big problem for the Shamrocks was raising the money to pay for the trip to St. Louis, which they ended up financing through a series of exhibition games.

The lack of funds available to Olympic athletes was the norm for the period, according to Cosentino. "There was an amateurish approach with not much state or government involve-



Building For The Olympics: Montreal's Big "O" was built at a cost of over \$1 billion, an expense which Quebec tax payers are still paying for. But still the entire city was consumed in the spirit of the 1976 Games.