Rules from Above, Resistance from Below:

The MPAAA, NSAHL and Nova Scotia’s Amateur Hockey Crisis, 1902-1910

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This paper will untangle the web of power relations between the Nova Scotia Amateur Hockey League (NSAHL) clubs and Maritime Provinces Amateur Athletic Association (MPAAA) from 1902 to 1910. The NSAHL was founded in 1902 in hopes of providing high level hockey under the umbrella of MPAAA regulations. An ideological disconnect between NSAHL clubs and the MPAAA, however, was evident from the league’s inception. Composed entirely of bourgeois athletes, the MPAAA sought to maintain Victorian, middle-class notions of amateurism, prohibiting player salaries, transportation payments, and accommodation funding. According to the MPAAA, hockey needed to be played for its moral and physical benefits alone. NSAHL Clubs, on the other hand, faced the reality that sport was a marketable product within the emerging culture of consumerism. Fans paid for a first rate team and expected teams to sign first rate players. With Central Canadian and American hockey leagues luring Maritime talent in exchange for cash, NSAHL clubs indulged in secretive compensation techniques to stack their line-ups, allowing teams to sign less affluent players and professionals. As hints of professionalism leaked through the press to the MPAAA, the emergent culture of sporting consumerism swam headlong against the tide of Victorian amateurism. The NSAHL and MPAAA became locked in a give-and-take struggle for the better part of decade, each side negotiating fiercely until the NSAHL collapsed in 1910.
From its inception in 1880 until 1907, the MPAAA operated as an independent entity, regulating amateur sport in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, free and clear of any parent body. On January 7, 1904, the MPAAA gave its blessing to the NSAHL, sanctioning the league via a public bulletin in local newspapers.¹ Having given its approval to the league, the MPAAA seemed content at first to follow a hands-off policy with respect to the day-to-day operation of the league. Indeed, the initial NSAHL season witnessed little MPAAA interference despite persistent rowdyism on and off the ice. Clearly league play deviated from the ideal of “gentlemanly amateurism” propounded throughout all corners of province.² The games were often rough, hotly contested match-ups, in which players battled each other for supremacy, rather than indulging in “sport for sports sake” as the MPAAA desired. At the center of NSAHL athletes’ ambitions was the Starr Trophy, at once the NSAHL and Maritime championship cup. During any given season NSAHL clubs would first compete to win the trophy within their league. Once a league champion was crowned, teams from the top amateur leagues of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Cape Breton were permitted to challenge their NSAHL counterparts for the trophy.

In 1906 season the MPAAA began to take a more active role in the governance of the NSAHL. As Daniel MacDonald has demonstrated in the Cape Breton context, teams began to search for skilled players beyond their home-base: “seeking players outside the local area was justified to create a winning senior team.”³ On the mainland, the 1906 New Glasgow Cubs of the NSAHL stacked their team with talent from around the Maritimes, leading other teams to cry foul. The New Glasgow line-up included Williams of Charlottetown, Gregory of PEI, Hay of Truro, McPherson of North Sydney, Musie of PEI and Morrison of Cape Breton. New Glasgow became what local hockey fans called a “tourist” team, assembled strictly to win the Starr
Trophy. It was generally believed that players flocked to New Glasgow because the management of the Cubs was paying under-the-table salaries to these players. The *Acadian Recorder* went so far as to call the all-star squad of New Glasgow the “Pittsburghs,” comparing the club to the Pittsburg professionals playing in the International Hockey League.\(^4\) Not surprisingly, New Glasgow’s ‘tourist’ club won the 1906 Starr Trophy as Maritime champions. Following its victory, and in defiance of the MPAAA, New Glasgow challenged the professional Montreal Wanderers for the Stanley Cup. If the Cubs followed through on the challenge they would certainly be declared professionals and suffer a ban from the NSAHL. The Toronto *Globe* observed that “[t]he Stanley Cup trustees must be proud of the benefit the trophy is to the sport, now that playing for it against the present holders [Montreal Wanderers] is prohibited by every amateur league in Canada.”\(^5\)

Despite warnings from the MPAAA, the Cubs went to Montreal to meet the Wanderers for the Stanley Cup in a two game, total goals contest. They were completely out played and defeated by a total score of 17-5. They returned to Nova Scotia as a team without a league, their amateur status having been revoked by the MPAAA. Upon their arrival home, the Cubs promptly pointed accusatory fingers at the Amherst Ramblers suggesting that the two-time Starr Trophy winners were equally professional. Amherst retorted that not only did New Glasgow play against a professional club but had added a professional “ringer” to their roster named “Reddy” McMillan.\(^6\) In hopes of restoring order the MPAAA responding to the counter-charges sending affidavits to Truro, Amherst, and both Halifax clubs, which were to be signed declarations of their amateur standing.\(^7\) In response to the public criticism of “tourist” clubs the MPAAA implemented a residency requirement applicable to all teams in the NSAHL. According to the new rule a player must have resided in the community in question for at least six months prior to
the hockey season. Although league teams abided by the rule, it had little effect on their rosters. Teams that desired outside players simply took care of negotiations earlier. Truro, for example, managed to dress at least two “Upper Canadians” on their roster, who they claimed were students at the Agricultural College.

The 1907 season witnessed a new controversy related to the administration of amateur athletics in Canada. The emergence of the Canadian Amateur Athletic Federation (AAFC) at Montreal in opposition to the Canadian Amateur Athletic Union (CAAU), and the subsequent ‘athletic war’ between the two bodies for national supremacy, caused problems within Maritime hockey. In 1907 the Cape Breton Hockey League recognized the CAAU as the legitimate governing body of Canadian amateur athletics. The MPAAA and NSAHL, however, had already pledged allegiance to Montreal and the AAFC during the previous year, and consequently refused to accept the Cape Breton League’s challenge for the Starr Trophy. The trustees of the trophy specified that challengers “must in all cases be recognized by the Maritime Provinces Amateur Athletic Association as the winner of a league recognized by the trustees.” The divisions in Nova Scotia between the AAFC and CAAU, however, were short lived. As early as February 25, 1907, the MPAAA was openly discussing switching their allegiance from the AAFC to the CAAU, a move that would reunite mainland Nova Scotia with Cape Breton Island under a common amateur code. The CBHL and the MPAAA/NSAHL were eventually able to reach an agreement of alliance before the end of the 1907, permitting the North Sydney to play against the Crescents for the Starr Trophy. In May of 1907 a delegation sent by the MPAAA met with CAAU officials in Toronto, making their new affiliation official.

The 1908 season was marked by the return of New Glasgow to the NSAHL. icing a team under the moniker “Colts,” Dispensing with the “Cubs”, a name now thoroughly associated with
professional sport, the new team called themselves the “Colts”: “seven boys who had never played or skated together before, gotten together on the spur of the moment to hold good New Glasgow’s intention to stay in the ring.”¹³ But the debate over professionalism in Maritime hockey continued. Jack D. MacDonald of North Sydney, suspended by the MPAAA for playing with New Glasgow in their 1907 Stanley Cup berth, returned to Maritime hockey despite his suspension, signing with the Fredericton Capitals of the New Brunswick Amateur Hockey League (NBAHL). This led the MPAAA to suspend the entire Capitals’ roster for playing alongside a professional and the entire Marysville, N.B. roster for having competed against MacDonald and the Capitals in a game on January 9th.¹⁴ According to the Fredericton Gleaner, if these suspensions were upheld the Fredericton, Marysville and Moncton clubs of the NBAHL would refuse to recognize the MPAAA and CAAU and transfer their allegiance to the AAFC.¹⁵ President Lithgow of the MPAAA quickly side-stepped the issue, and in turn invested the NBAHL with the power necessary to resolve the MacDonald situation on its own.¹⁶ Given that MacDonald was a professional by MPAAA decree, and as such was ineligible under the NBAHL by-laws, Lithgow had every reason to believe that MacDonald would be ruled ineligible by the NBAHL. In 1908, however, MacDonald represented himself as very much an “amateur.” The son of the proprietor of the Belmont Hotel in North Sydney, MacDonald put his skills to work as a clerk at Barker House in Fredericton, making his living outside of hockey. If MacDonald had been a professional 1907, an argument could certainly be made that he was either reformed, or working diligently to restore his amateur orientation by January of 1908.¹⁷

The NBAHL chose to reinstate the Fredericton and Marysville players, including MacDonald, based on the belief that both teams had been informed and honestly believed that
MacDonald had been officially reinstated on January 1, 1908 and had played the game on the 9th in good faith. MacDonald and his teammates signed affidavits stating that they:

Never directly or indirectly received any bonus or payment nor made any agreement whereby any bonus or payment was pending, or would be paid at some future date for services while playing as a member of any club; that they have never received any money consideration whatever for services rendered as an athlete, except actual travelling expenses; that they have never accepted employment offered in lieu of services as an athlete.

The contours of an emerging compromise were clear. The NBAHL recognized the MPAAA’s primacy, in order to maintain eligibility for the Starr Trophy. In return, the Starr Trophy residency rules were bent to permit NBAHL teams to dress players active as of January 1, 1908, in future Starr Trophy matches, while NSAHL clubs were made to uphold the league’s six month residency stipulation. Not everyone was happy with the arrangement. The Acadian Recorder, for example, complained of an uneven playing field in the Fredericton-Amherst Starr Trophy series that season: “The Ramblers under the residence rules of the Nova Scotia League are at a disadvantage in these games. All of the Amherst players must have been living in Amherst six months prior to the opening of the Nova Scotia League, Fredericton only to Jan. 1, and the rules say they must be bona fide residents.” With the help of Frank Morrison and Jack MacDonald, the Fredericton Capitals romped to victory in the Starr series with Amherst, winning in two games, 6-2 and 8-1.

Just as it seemed the MPAAA turned its back on the NSAHL by showing favoritism to the NABHL, the MPAAA stripped the Fredericton Capitals of the Starr Trophy for playing Oren Frood, a professional from Pembroke, Ontario, under the pseudonym Claude Oren. Upon the announcement that the Starr Trophy would be played for between Amherst and Moncton,
charges of professionalism were immediately hurled at Moncton by the suspended Capitals. Ironically, Chester Gregory, star of the Moncton Victorias, was on tour with the Fredericton Capitals in Cape Breton at the time and was, therefore, suspended by the MPAAA. The seasons, however, were in transition, the temperature rising and ice melting. A smallpox outbreak in Amherst complicated matters further, leading to a municipal prohibition of public gatherings. Eventually time ran out on the hockey season, the warming days of spring ushering in baseball’s turn at bat. The Starr Trophy – the emblem of Maritime hockey supremacy – went unawarded.

In 1909 the “professionals” won the battle with MPAAA. In an incredibly controversial meeting held at New Glasgow, five players deemed to be “pros” by the MPAAA in 1907 were reinstated and permitted to play for New Glasgow’s amateur club. Morrison, Musie, Murphy, Williams and Dunphy, all previously professionalized by the MPAAA, were returned to amateur standing.

The Starr Trophy match between Amherst and Moncton, rescheduled from the previous season, was finally played with Chester Gregory – formerly professionalized by the MPAAA – in the lineup for Moncton. Gregory and company defeated Amherst two games straight in a best-of-three series, convincingly winning the second contest 8-1.

The 1909 Moncton Victorias went on to retain their Maritime title by winning series against the Charlottetown Victorias and Halifax Crescents. Following Moncton’s success against the Crescents the Amherst News published the following observation: “Moncton retains the Starr Trophy by a margin of one. It may be interesting to note that there is only one Moncton man playing on the Moncton team. The others are all drawn from other centres, but of course their ability in stick handling had nothing to do with taking them to the railway centre [Moncton]. The Crescents were all Halifax boys. Five of the [Amherst] Ramblers [sic] septette
belong to Amherst, and the remaining two are bona fide taxpayers of the town.” Clearly a feeling of distrust was beginning to percolate throughout Nova Scotia towards the MPAAA’s treatment of the NBAHL clubs. The value of homegrown hockey clubs, at once praised within MPAAA rhetoric and devalued through MPAAA actions or inactions, was a nagging topic of debate. What sense was there in following the rules if the MPAAA would simply compromise their own by-laws, giving offenders an unfair advantage via the recruitment of professional players?

The NSAHL began to fall apart around questions of “professionalism” and “amateurism” in 1910. Windsor, a club that voiced its displeasure with the MPAAA’s reinstatement of the New Glasgow professionals in 1909, left the NSAHL and entered a team in the WNSHL. The Halifax Wanderers made a similar move, opting to play in the newly formed Independent League, composed of the Wanderers, Saint Mary’s College and the Wanderers’ old HHL rivals, Dalhousie University, hoping to play “real amateur hockey, without any suspicion as to the eligibility of the players on the teams.”

Despite the contraction of the league, the NSAHL went ahead with operations in 1910 with New Glasgow, Truro, Amherst and the Halifax Crescents vying for the league title. The clubs made little effort to hide their professionalism. Chester Gregory, previously the star of the Moncton Victorias, was brought in to play for New Glasgow. Originally, New Glasgow had abided by MPAAA sanctions, adhering to an order given by President Johnson of the MPAAA not to play Gregory on Friday, February 4, 1910 against the Amherst Ramblers. The same night Norman, a professional from Montreal, warmed up with the Amherst Ramblers, but did not play the game. Both Norman and Gregory, however, ended up with New Glasgow, leading Amherst, Truro and Halifax to boycott future games against the New Glasgow club. The New Glasgow
Chronicle described the actions of their town’s rivals as hypocritical, claiming that “the refusal of the clubs to play with Gregory and Norman might have been expected, for as long as these four provincial teams masquerade as amateurs, it is unreasonable to think that they would compete against professionals, unless they were willing to tear the mask of and come out in their true light as professionals.” Following this open admittance of professionalism, the New Glasgow Amateur Athletic Association (NGAAA) distanced themselves from the club. At the same time, the NGAAA contended that players on other NSAHL clubs were receiving payment and should be investigated. On the evening of February 9, 1910, delegates representing the Amherst, Truro and Halifax NSAHL clubs met, and voted unanimously to remove New Glasgow from the league. Nova Scotia hockey war was declared, the allied forces of Amherst, Truro and Halifax throwing the first stone. New Glasgow promptly retaliated. Both Norman and Gregory signed affidavits stating that they knew of players on each of the other NSAHL teams that were being paid including Little of the Crescents; Hughes, Murray and Curran of Amherst; and McGrath of Truro.

Within a week the Truro and Halifax clubs openly declared themselves professionals. The Halifax Crescents, so not to affect the amateur standing of their parent club, broke with the Crescent AAA. Gregory and Norman were rumored to have traded in their Colts sweaters for Truro jerseys, and were to be joined by Oliver, goaltender of the New Glasgow club. The bolstered Truro team then made tracks for Halifax where they were scheduled to meet the Crescents in the first openly professional hockey game in the city. The Crescents’ made fewer additions to their line-up, but did manage to enlist Ves Laing of the Amherst Ramblers. The MPAAA acted promptly, suspending and/or professionalizing a truly massive list of players, totaling no less than thirty seven from the NBAHL and NSAHL. There was much anticipation
in Halifax, and fully three thousand spectators filled the arena to see Gregory, Norman and Liang in their new colours. Alas, only the latter took the ice. New Glasgow decided to enter the professional circuit themselves, and thus enticed Gregory, Norman and Oliver to refuse their services to Truro. By the end of the 1910 season, the WNSHL had become the only ‘senior’ amateur league active in Nova Scotia. Both the NSAHL and CBHL folded, and teams from Sydney, North Sydney, Truro, New Glasgow and Halifax went into competition with one another as declared professionals.

With the NSAHL in shambles, the Windsor Swastikas, winners of the WNSHL, applied to represent Nova Scotia against the winners of the Prince Edward Island league in a series for the Starr Trophy. Their request was denied by the trophy’s trustees who claimed only ‘provincial’ league champions could contend for the title, doing so despite having permitted the CBHL to compete for the trophy in the past. Yet the rules governing Starr Trophy eligibility published in the *Acadian Recorder* in 1908 clearly state that the winner of the NSAHL must first play the winners of the CBHL, the victor to defend the trophy: “if a challenge is received from the winners of recognized league in the Province of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island [sic], or Western Nova Scotia (west of Windsor and Halifax).” The Crescents and Amherst Ramblers threw together amateur clubs to play for the championship of Nova Scotia, which Amherst won 17-0. Like the WNSAHL, however, this much diluted version of the NSAHL went unrecognized by the trustees of the Starr Trophy. Despite the efforts of the MPAAA over the years one thing was now clear. Professionalism had triumphed over amateurism in Nova Scotian hockey before World War One.
ENDNOTES

1 *Acadian Recorder*, January 7, 1904.

2 The MPAAA only dealt out serious punishment in one instance. This was a game between New Glasgow and a team from Pictou that ended when the New Glasgow players left the ice in protest. The entire New Glasgow team was suspended. *Acadian Recorder*, March 28, 1904.

3 Daniel MacDonald, “‘Class, Community and Commercialism’: Hockey in Industrial Cape Breton, 1917-1937,” in *Coast to Coast: Hockey in Canada to the Second World War*, Edited by John Chi-Kit Wong (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11.


6 *Acadian Recorder*, January 8, 1907.

7 *Acadian Recorder*, January 12, 1907. Truro players McGrath, Hay, Lett and Moffatt were all suspended due to the tardiness of their replies. *Acadian Recorder*, January 26, 1907. All the above men, however, were reinstated shortly thereafter. *Acadian Recorder*, January 28, 1907.


9 *Acadian Recorder*, January 14, 1907.


11 *Acadian Recorder*, February 25, 1907. Kevin G. Jones confuses matters when he states: “This dispute between these two groups produced the rapid development of provincial organizations, with the Maritime Provinces A.A.A. affiliating [with the CAAU] in 1907.” His writing is unclear regarding which governing body the MPAAA affiliated with. By tracing his footnote (*Globe and Mail*, May 7, 1907), we see that Jones is referring to the affiliation between the MPAAA and CAAU, and not the MPAAA’s earlier affiliation with the AAFC. Kevin G. Jones, “Developments in Amateurism and Professionalism in Early 20th Century Canada,” *Journal of Sport History*, 2.1 (1975), 32.

12 *The Globe*, May 7, 1907.


15 *Acadian Recorder*, January 12, 1908.

16 *Acadian Recorder*, January 14, 1908.

18 *Acadian Recorder*, January 16, 1908.

19 *Acadian Recorder*, January 17, 1908.

20 *Acadian Recorder*, February 24, 1908.

21 *Acadian Recorder*, March 12, 1908.

22 *Acadian Recorder*, March 25, 1908.

23 For the suspension of Chester Gregory see “MPAAA Official Bulletin No. 420,” *Acadian Recorder*, March 28, 1908. For suspension of Glace Bay see “MPAAA Official Bulletin No. 419,” *Acadian Recorder*, March 27, 1908. North Sydney, Amherst, Marysville, St. John, Charlottetown, Moncton and the Halifax Crescents were all suspended via the “MPAAA Official Bulletin No. 418,” *Acadian Recorder*, March 25, 1908. All teams suspended via “Bulletin No. 418” were reinstated under “Bulletin No. 419.”


26 *Acadian Recorder*, January 9, 1909.

27 The Moncton Victorias defeated the Charlottetown Victorias for the Starr Trophy by winning back-to-back contests (unclear whether the series was best of three or aggregate goals). For the Moncton-Charlottetown series see *Acadian Recorder*, January 20, 1909 and *Acadian Recorder*, January 21, 1909. The series between the Halifax Crescents and Moncton Victorias was two games, total score. Game one ended in a 2-2 draw. Moncton won the second game 2-1, taking the Starr Trophy by a total score of 4-3. For game one see, *Acadian Recorder*, March 1, 1909. For game two see, *Acadian Recorder*, March 2, 1909.


29 *Acadian Recorder*, January 22, 1910.

30 For the composition of the NSAHL in 1910 see *Acadian Recorder*, February 5, 1910.

31 *Acadian Recorder*, February 5, 1910.

32 *New Glasgow Chronicle* [c. February 8, 1910] as quoted by the *Acadian Recorder*, February 9, 1910.

33 *Acadian Recorder*, February 9, 1910.

34 *Acadian Recorder*, February 10, 1910.

35 *Acadian Recorder*, February 11, 1910.
36 *Acadian Recorder*, February 15, 1910.


38 *Acadian Recorder*, February 16, 1910.

39 *Acadian Recorder*, February 24, 1908.