

## **British Empire Games: 1954 Vancouver Canada**

In 1930, the first Commonwealth Games were hosted by the city of Hamilton, located in Canada. Only eleven countries participated in the games that opening year, but now the numbers have expanded to a notable seventy-two. Originally, the Games were called the British Empire Games. However, with the pass of decades, the name slowly shifted towards the modern title: The Commonwealth Games. The pivotal name changing years took place between 1950 to 1958. Although the games were known in the 1950s as the British Empire and Commonwealth Games, the Hamilton Spectator still referred to them as the British Empire Games.<sup>1</sup>

In 1954, the awarding of the games to Vancouver was the result of the hard work by an enterprising group of local leaders led by Mayor Charles Thompson. After receiving the honour of hosting the British Empire Games, Vancouver hastily set out to advance the quality of the games by improving organizational skills and city appearance. Thompson began these improvements by building a new stadium, Empire Stadium, with a spectator capacity of over twenty-five thousand. With the new arena, a large volunteer staff and promotion of the “miracle mile”, the 1954 British Empire Games commenced.<sup>2</sup>

July 30, 1954: the opening ceremony of the British Empire Games in Vancouver Canada started off with a bang. Twenty-five thousand, three hundred and thirty-two paying spectators came to the Empire Stadium to witness the commencement of the

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<sup>1</sup> “The Growth of the Games”, <[www.commonwealthgames.com](http://www.commonwealthgames.com)>.

<sup>2</sup> <[www.thecgf.com](http://www.thecgf.com)>

exhilarating athletic competitions between twenty-four countries.<sup>3</sup> Six hundred and sixty-two talented athletes flooded the Vancouver stadium as they proudly paraded their nation's colours. The anticipation and excitement around the upcoming events was so thick that it could be cut with a knife. The most esteemed and talked about event was the "Miracle Mile", an event that praised the endurance and speed of famous athletes from around the world. Athletic events were to start the morning of the thirty-first.<sup>4</sup>

Countries participating in the British Empire Games included: Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Scotland, Trinidad and Tobago, Northern Ireland, North and South Rhodesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Wales, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Uganda, Barbados, Kenya, Gold Coast and British Guiana, Malaysia, Singapore, Nauru and Zimbabwe.<sup>5</sup> Athletic events varied depending on the participating gender. Male events included: 100 yds, 220yds, 440yds, 880yds, 1 mile, 3 miles, 6 miles, 120yds Hurdles, 440yds Hurdles, 4x110yds Relay, 4x440yds Relay, Marathon, High Jump, Pole Vault, Triple Jump, Long Jump, Shot Put, Discus, Javelin and the Hammer. Females did not participate in nearly as many events as the males. Female events included: 100yds, 220yds, 80yds Hurdles, 4x110yds Relay, High Jump, Long Jump, Shot Put, Discus and Javelin.<sup>6</sup> Recognition was awarded to the top six contestants in the various competitions. Overall standings were determined by a point system, where first place received ten points, second received five points, third received four points etc.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Big Crowd at Opening", *Hamilton Spectator*, July 31 1954: 27.

<sup>4</sup> "Commonwealth Games Information 2002",  
<[http://www.olympic.org.nz/documents/uploads/cg\\_info\\_2002\\_v2.pdf](http://www.olympic.org.nz/documents/uploads/cg_info_2002_v2.pdf)>.

<sup>5</sup> "1954 British Empire and Commonwealth Games",  
<[http://213.131.178.162/The\\_Games/History/Canada\\_1954/default.asp](http://213.131.178.162/The_Games/History/Canada_1954/default.asp)>.

<sup>6</sup> "1954 Commonwealth Games Men's and Women's Results", <[www.sportingheros.net](http://www.sportingheros.net)>.

<sup>7</sup> "How they stand in Vancouver", *Hamilton Spectator*, August 6 1954: 29.

Around the time of the 1954 British Empire Games, sexism and racial discrimination still lingered in society. Coverage of the Commonwealth Games was heavily influenced by these prejudicial overtones. In this section, we will focus on the *Hamilton Spectator*'s coverage on the British Empire Games, critically analyzing the treatment of gender, race, and overall coverage of the games and sports.

Within the *Hamilton Spectator*, coverage of the British Empire Games was minimal but existent. The week prior to the British Empire Games, promotion of the main events was prevalent. Articles provided general information about the scheduling of events, location of events and favoured athletes. Post-coverage of the British Empire Games included medal tallies and general wrap-up of the events of the previous week. Aside from the final day of competition, all coverage of the events was restricted to the sports section towards the end of the newspaper.<sup>8</sup> One can speculate that sports did not yet play a large role in society. Unlike today, sports was not considered a vocation but rather a past time or hobby. Politics, eulogies, advertisements and yellow journalism (local gossip) permeated the majority of the paper. To reinforce the idea that sports were not as focused on during this time, it is noted that only three out of the possible thirty eight pages were dedicated to sports coverage. Therefore, sports were not placed on a high pedestal during this time period.

Another aspect supporting the idea of the inferior role of sport in society is the lack of coverage on the Empire Games within the sports column entitled "Sports Trail". Over the three weeks of games coverage, the column's author, Tommy Moore, failed to inform readers of significant events and results happening in Vancouver.<sup>9</sup> Columnists typically

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<sup>8</sup> *Hamilton Spectator*, August 3 1954: 26-29.

<sup>9</sup> Tommy Moore, "Sports Trail", *Hamilton Spectator*, July 24 – August 14: front pg of sports section.

focus and write about events, attitudes and occurrences that they feel are of great importance. For example, Tommy Moore frequently referred to a boxing match between the Canadian Togo brothers and their Japanese opponents. This match he typified as the event of the decade and emphasized its popularity compared to other athletic matches.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Moore never mentions the Empire Games in his column, may demonstrate how he and other Canadians perceived the Empire games: unimportant. “Unimportance” can also be seen in the way that Hamilton Spectator journalists omit coverage of smaller or non-dominant countries in their newspaper.

Due to the fact that the Empire games celebrate the alliance and camaraderie between Britain and its colonies, the Hamilton Spectator did not focus solely on Canadian athletes, but also on the British and Australians. In fact, over the duration of three weeks, there were few references to countries other than Canada, Britain and Australia mentioned in the paper. Typically, bolded titles and articles dealt exclusively with Canadian, British and Australian athletes. Even if an article was to be focused on an athlete from a smaller country, generally the piece would be over ridden with references to athletes from the above three countries. For example, an article written in the July 27 issue of the Spectator entitled “New Zealander Confident”, briefly mentioned that Halberg (New Zealand) posed a threat to Britain’s Bannister and Australia’s Landy in the one-mile race. The remainder of the article discussed the track records and practice routines of Bannister and Landy. Although the title indicates that the article’s focus would be on Halberg and his accomplishments, essentially less than half dealt with such.<sup>11</sup> Font size also emphasized the importance of Canada, Britain and Australia within

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<sup>10</sup> “Togo Brothers Keep Canadian Mat Crown”, *Hamilton Spectator*, July 28 1954: 27.

<sup>11</sup> W.R. Wheatly, “New Zealander Confident”, *Hamilton Spectator*, July 27 1954: 25.

the articles. The first opening paragraphs of a written piece, generally dealing with men from these three countries, were printed in larger font to accentuate their athletic excellence. Athletes from other participating countries never received such recognition. In the August 4 issue of the *Spectator*, an article entitled “World Record Set by Doug Hepburn” highlights, in increased font, his gold medal achievement in weightlifting. Continuing further into the article, similar gold medal achievements made by Southern Rhodesia, Scotland and South Africa go unrecognized in small font.<sup>12</sup> Biased focuses on these three specific countries continue in different variations throughout the paper.

Another way in which one can see this biased favouritism of countries is through the newspaper’s coverage of sporting events in which these countries excelled. The three main sports covered are running, swimming and weightlifting.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, Canada, Britain and Australia generally received gold in those events. For instance, coverage on Southern Rhodesia’s gold medal in bowling never made the headlines.<sup>14</sup> A possible explanation for this lack of coverage could be due to the fact that this medal was not won by one of the three “superior” countries or was not a sport worthy of coverage. One can also see this impartiality of coverage through photograph selection, pose, size and placement throughout the sports section.

It has been said that a picture can say a thousand words. Undoubtedly, the *Hamilton Spectator*’s picture selection, size and placement speak volumes about what they deem as important and what they want the reader to believe is valuable. Over eighty-five percent of the pictures printed somehow incorporated, whether exclusively or in-group shots,

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<sup>12</sup> W.R. Wheatly, “World Record Set by Doug Hepburn”, *Hamilton Spectator*, August 4 1954: 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Hamilton Spectator*, July 27 – August 7 1954.

<sup>14</sup> W.R. Wheatly, “World Record Set by Doug Hepburn”, *Hamilton Spectator*, August 4 1954: 24.

athletes from Canadian, British or Australian origin. Visual recognition was rarely given to minority countries or the minority gender.

Another common trend found in the Hamilton Spectator is the discrimination against women in sport. Women represented only fourteen percent (94 out of 662 athletes) of the athletes present at the games. Not only can this discrimination be seen through their insignificant numbers, it is also shown through the type of coverage that they received. Through the duration of the British Empire Games, coverage of women exceeded levels of everyday newspaper exposure. However, this treatment was still miniscule compared to that of males. Articles pertaining to women's sporting events, generally, if not always, were placed on the bottom of the second or third page of the sports section. Female headline coverage was non-existent. Moreover, in depth articles on females and their achievements in the Games did not compare to the number of write-ups on males. Articles dealing with males elaborated on their emotions, routines, and reflections on their performance, whereas, females were only allotted a few sentences on their standings from a specific event.

As is observed from the Hamilton Spectator, women were not given a solitary spotlight when they excelled in an event at the British Empire Games. Instead of receiving a review solely devoted to themselves and their sport, coverage on females was typically incorporated into the final paragraph of men's results and reviews. A plausible rationale behind this discrimination against female athletes is that the newspaper was oriented towards a male audience. This implies that males were generally not concerned or interested in female sporting abilities due to their overriding view that a female's place was not in sport but rather in the home. A typical view of a female and her role in society

was that “athletics do not mix with marriage and business”.<sup>15</sup> Females were often presented with a choice of marriage or sport competition. According to the male population, women could not be devoted to both. Thus, due to the males stereotype that women belonged in the home, it is possible that male reporters de-emphasized females in the Games to follow societal trends and tendencies.

Discrimination can also be seen through the photographs of women participating in the Games. First, the amount of photos of women in the paper compared to that of men were very minimal. Over the three-week period, only four pictures of women competitors were present in the paper. Moreover, the size of the female photos was quite small and conveyed women as “sex objects”. The only pictures of females present in the paper were those of women in swimsuits. Although not stated, it can be implied that women, although excelling in other sports, were displayed as “something good to look at” rather than athletically capable.<sup>16</sup> For example, in the July 28 issue of the *Spectator*, a picture of Margaret McDowall, an eighteen-year-old swimmer from Scotland, is poised in a swimsuit during a practice. Although no write-up ensues the picture, editors still chose to display the image in the newspaper.<sup>17</sup> Why editors did not include bigger and more sport-diverse pictures in the paper is beyond our knowledge. Thus, discrimination against women competitors in the British Empire Games took multiple forms and hence perpetuated this biased trend against women in society.

Although not outright racist, the *Hamilton Spectator*’s coverage on men and women of different race was minimal. A prime example of this racist overtone is the lack of coverage on the African American gold-medallist, Keevil Daly. Daly was the first

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<sup>15</sup> “Last Start for Marg”, *Hamilton Spectator*, July 31 1954: 27.

<sup>16</sup> “A Second for Canada”, *Hamilton Spectator*, August 7 1954: 26.

<sup>17</sup> “No baby”, *Hamilton Spectator*, July 28 1954: 27.

member of the Canadian team to win a gold medal at the British Empire Games. Even though this would seem like a significant event, very little was mentioned about this victorious feat. In the August 3rd and 4th issues of the *Spectator*, merely one sixth of a column was dedicated to his gold medal accomplishment.<sup>18</sup> To add injury to insult, a picture smaller than that dedicated to women was displayed on the second page of the sports section to commemorate his gold medal victory. To emphasize this prejudice, George Park, a white Canadian, received over one and a half columns of write-up on his fourth place finish in the 110 yards freestyle swimming match.<sup>19</sup> By observing this unfair spectacle, one can see the favouritism and support of white athletes over their African American teammates during the 1954 Games.

The 1954 British Empire Games celebrated the athletic achievements of men and women from around the world. The *Hamilton Spectator*'s perception of these events was heavily influenced by societal trends and thus presented a tainted and prejudicial view of sporting events and people associated with the British Empire Games. With the progression of time, these partial views diminished with the altering society. Yet, in 1954, what society believed was truthful and of importance was perpetuated in their newspaper presentation of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games.

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<sup>18</sup> "Victory" & "Weightlifter Wins Medal for Canada", *Hamilton Spectator*, August 3 & 4 1954: 24, 29.

<sup>19</sup> "Hamilton Swimmer Gave Fine Display in Final", *Hamilton Spectator*, August 3 1954: 26.

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