

M. M. “Bobby” Robinson

A Local Sport Legend

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Introduction

Who was a local sport legend who greatly influenced sport in Hamilton? M.M. “Bobby” Robinson, known for founding the Commonwealth games, was a fundamental part of sport in Hamilton in the 20s and 30s. His real name was Melville Marks Robinson but everyone called him “Bobby” (see Appendix A.4.). He was born on April 8, 1888 in Peterborough, Ontario. The following is all about Robinson’s accomplishments, his legacy, and what people thought of him. First I will look at secondary sources and what they have to say about this man. Second, I will use primary sources like the newspaper to see what is said about the man. The question I will be asking is whether or not these broader sources agree with each other.

Review of literature

I did the review of literature by looking in a book called “The Commonwealth Games the First 60 Years” by Cleve Dheensaw and also searching the internet using the popular search engine Google. There was not a lot of information on the internet about this man. It mostly talked about his founding of the British Empire games, known today as the Commonwealth games.

One article from the Hamilton Gallery of Distinction website says that Robinson was “renowned throughout Canada for aggressive championship of farmers’ causes”. Wikipedia mentioned Robinson’s involvement as a track and field manager and as the founder of the Commonwealth games, his community-minded self living on a farm near Hamilton, in Burlington and the fact that he has a high school in Burlington named after him (for picture see Appendix A.5.). The book by Cleve Dheensaw gives a lot of information about Robinson and how the British Empire games came to be. It says, “M.

M. Bobby Robinson, who, as manager of the 1928 Canadian Olympic track and field team to Amsterdam and the sports editor of the Hamilton *Spectator* newspaper, had a myriad of connections in the sports world.” “The ebullient Robinson wouldn’t quit. He just kept on pushing and pushing and pushing. If they wouldn’t accept willingly, he decided he would just wear them down with his sheer persistence and enthusiasm for the project.” It also mentions the “nerve, pluck and resolve of Bobby Robinson” (9-10). This is what my secondary sources had to say on my topic.

Methodology and limitations

My methodology was to look at newspapers to see what they said about “Bobby” Robinson. I decided to use the name “Bobby” in my research instead of Melville Marks because he was better known as “Bobby”. I limited my research by only looking at the Toronto Star and the Hamilton Spectator. To further limit this search I only looked at The Hamilton Spectator for the British Empire games in 1930. This is because it was harder to look through the microfiche of the Spectator and I had limited time to search, so I narrowed my dates. I also did this because I figured it would have a lot of stuff about Robinson as he founded those particular games. The Toronto Star I limited by only looking at it between the years 1927 and 1938. The reason for this was to get a little background information and also because his first major event as a manager was the 1928 Olympics and his last the 1936 Olympics.

I also looked at memorabilia from Robinson at Greg Maychak’s home. This memorabilia included old photographs, flags, a jacket, Robinsons’ travel chest, and ribbons and medals/medallions. I put a few pictures of these items in the appendix that pertain to my paper.

Findings

There were numerous articles in the Toronto Star on Robinson, a few from the Hamilton Spectator and some good photos and memorabilia. I will highlight what some of them said about him separating them into categories: his managing abilities, the British Empire games and his other accomplishments.

He was the track and field manager for a number of years, but was he any good at his job? The first piece of evidence that he was a good manager can be found in Appendix A.1. This is a picture of Percy Williams, whom Robinson managed. It is a signed picture stating that Robinson was “a real sport and a good manager”. The second piece of evidence is “credit is due M. M. Robinson for his splendid work in organizing the camp and managing its activities” (Star Aug 4, 1928). Although this is not about his skills managing a track team, it still lends proof to his abilities. A good manager is one who can plan well, and plan in advance. They must know what might happen and where that would take the team. Robinson was such a man. “Everyone knows that the peppery Bobby Robinson is the man behind the Olympic club and the man who plans and plans ahead of everyone else” (Star Mar 2, 1929). Also, “‘Bobby’ is known from coast to coast as a great organizer”. (Star June 26, 1931) Later on in his career he was still called “a good man, a splendid organizer” (Star Nov 25, 1936). Robinson also stayed up-to-date all events pertaining to his job as the manager of the track and field team for both the British Empire games and the Olympics. An example of this comes from the July 14, 1938 edition of the Toronto Star which reads “Mr. Robinson told of a recent meeting... ‘It was felt by all,’ he said, ‘that we should not participate in games held by a country at

war.’” Robinson was very active in making sure that Canada did not send a team to a country who had just invaded another country. These all show that indeed, Robinson was a very fine manager.

The British Empire Games are Robinson’s greatest legacy, though he would not say so (Maychak). I do not think that the success of these games needs to be questioned since they are still occurring to this day. However, it is important to show Robinson’s own success with these games and how people remember him for them. The hatching of this idea occurred in Amsterdam as before mentioned. The following is an excerpt from the Toronto Star from Jan 11, 1930 giving more details on the games:

British Empire meet scheme M. M. “Bobby” Robinson of Hamilton, manager of the Canadian Olympic track and field team, hatched one day last July over in Amsterdam...it is going to be by far the biggest thing in sport Canada ever out over...This proposition for a set of British Empire games—the forerunner, it is hoped, of a regular schedule of meets to be held by Great Britain and her dominions midway between each Olympiad—originated with Bobby Robinson at Amsterdam as a direct result of the dominance, real or attempted, by Germany and the United States at the last Olympic meet...Robinson finally boiled over, and, after a consultation with other Canadian officials, met the representatives of the other British teams and laid the foundation for what is hoped will be a series of British Empire meets to be held every four years. The one which is to be held at Hamilton, August 16 to August 23 this year, is to be the inaugural meet.

These games did indeed become a great success. The Hamilton Spectator had very good coverage of the games during the week they took place. The sports pages were filled each day with the results from the previous day, the events currently happening, and what is happening the next day. The day after the games were done, the Spectator was filled with praise for Bobby and his great accomplishment. “The nation’s ambassadors, as one, joined in saying, ‘well done, Bobby Robinson, and well done, Hamilton’ “it was a night of triumph for M. M. “Bobby” Robinson” “the [London] Times today pays warm tribute to “Bobby” Robinson, founder and organizer” (Hamilton Spectator Aug 24, 1930).

Robinson also received presents from different groups thanking him for his great work. Beatty, chairman of the general committee presented “Bobby” with a “handsome silver cigar box”; “Sir James Leigh-Wood, chairman of the council of Great Britain on British Empire games, presented Mr. Robinson with a beautiful silver loving cup on behalf of all visiting teams” (for a picture of said cup see Appendix A.2.); “W.M. Bernard, vice-president of the British Amateur Athletic association, presented Mr. Robinson with a beautiful silver tray” (Spectator Aug. 24, 1930). These games later had a few name changes and are now known as the Commonwealth games. They happen every four years, with the next one occurring in 2010 in Delhi, India. Robinson’s legacy is these games, who knows how long it may have taken to establish an event like them had he not taken the initiative.

Now in regards to his other accomplishments. He was a veteran in the first Great War, which was stated above. He received/kept a few medals from this war which can be found in Appendix A.3. He was also very involved in agriculture in this time. This was partially due to the fact that he lived on a farm in Burlington (Star Aug. 23, 1930). As a farmer he did a lot of good for agriculture and was very opinionated on the subject. There is an article in the May 18, 1934 edition of the Toronto Star stating, “Maintaining that mass buying was one of the worst threats to the fruit and vegetable growers of Canada, M. M. “Bobby” Robinson, head of the Ontario Growers’ Marketing Council, cited cases.” The article goes on to talk about how rival chains like to have a price-cutting war, which affects the vegetable and fruit producers because they automatically force down the price of the items they buy from the producer. Robinson was fundamental in working with producers and buyers to fix this problem. As stated above,

Robinson was very active in sport in Hamilton. Another one of his accomplishments is that he was president of The Hamilton Olympic Club (Star may 20, 1927). He held this position for a number of years. Also pertaining to sport in Hamilton, “Robinson is now secretary of the Canadian Olympic committee, a position in which his boundless energy and experience in international and Olympic sport makes him peculiarly valuable” (Star Dec. 3, 1931). Not only was Robinson a good manager, he had a lot of head knowledge which made him a very valuable asset to have on any committee in Hamilton pertaining to sport.

Conclusion

Do my findings from the newspapers agree with my secondary sources? Yes, I would have to say that they both agree with each other. The primary sources go more in depth on his actual personality traits and qualities, but the secondary sources cover what the primary sources say. The similarities are numerous, but there are a few differences. Both of the sources mentioned how good he was at managing, “a real sport and a good manager” (photo of Percy Williams) and “The ebullient Robinson wouldn’t quit” (Dheensaw 9). Both of these quotes either mention he was a good manager or mention a quality of his that makes him a good manager. Another similarity is they both proclaim the good he did for sport in Hamilton. This goes to show that Robinson’s legacy is a good one, the first Empire games were a success, and he did well for Hamilton. There were also a few slight differences. The secondary sources mentioned a few times about Robinson’s “championship of farmers’ causes” (Hamilton Gallery of Distinction) and the good he did in agriculture. However, I was only able to find one article about any connection to him fighting about farmers’ causes. This article came from the May 18,

1934 edition of the Toronto Star. It talked about the mass-buying problem and how Robinson was trying to fight for farmers' rights. The reason for not finding a lot about this in the newspaper likely is because of my limitations. He might have done more of his fighting either earlier in his life, or later on, but I only looked at an 11 year span of his life. Another difference that is not found in the above is the issues he had over getting his amateur card. The secondary sources never mentioned it at all, whereas in the primary source there were at least 4 articles on it. A quote from one of these articles states "Robinson was refused his card by the old Ontario branch," (Star Nov. 18, 1933). This goes to show that it was not a huge issue in the end, or not important enough to mention 70 years later.

Overall, Robinson is remembered for positive things. The work he did to advance sport in Hamilton, the founding of the Commonwealth games, and his involvement in agriculture. I would conclude that his greatest legacy is the Commonwealth games because they are still a popular event that happens every four years. Many people around the world train for these games as if they were the Olympics. Robinson can be proud of this accomplishment; his sheer not giving up brought us these games. While I would conclude this is his greatest legacy, 'Bobby' Robinson said that his greatest legacy is not the Commonwealth games, but all he did for agriculture in Ontario because that is what feeds people (Greg Maychak).

Appendix

A. pictures

1. Below: picture given to Robinson by Percy Williams



2.



3.



4. Below: "Bobby Robinson is on the right."



5. Below: M. M. Robinson High School (collected from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M.M._Robinson_High_School)



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