

A man ahead of his time

The theme in the sporting press since Lloyd Percival died is that he was ahead of his time and that neither his message nor his contribution to Canadian sport has ever been fairly recognized or appreciated.

There is a great irony in this, one which Percival recognized. It's not a national government, not universities granting honorary degrees, not honorific medals or keys to a city which determine recognition: It is the responses, building into a myth about a man from all those in the field of his endeavor.

Among the several reasons why the sporting leaders in Canada so often failed to give Lloyd Percival his due lies out there in the Canadian world of sporting journalism. He was a challenging man. His ideas and proposals usually challenged the 'status quo' in the organization and administration of sport.

There are no more conservative "establishments" anywhere in society than the sporting ones and few that are less challenged by those who report and interpret.

This is especially notable in professional sports and overwhelmingly so in hockey, the sport which has taken an inordinate amount of Canadian interest and resources.

The NHL jeered at Percival and dismissed out of hand his masterpiece, the hockey handbook, first published in 1951. Hap Day, then the recognized mastermind of coaching with the Leafs, derogated the author and the thorough analyses in the book. The USSR and Tarasov built their hockey system upon it.

It's a harsh judgment but no one in the sporting press was ready or willing or brave enough during the '50s to appreciate Percival's analysis of hockey to apply it.

Indeed, even today reporters still make only cliché use of its belated and successful manifestations in Russian guise.

The level of the art of managing and coaching in NHL circles is still primitive when contrasted to the empirical thoroughness of the hockey handbook.

The prophet was unrecognized in his own country because his ideas were too radical and comprehensive, not just for those they were designed for, but also for those who report. Percival was tagged as controversial, a pop-off, egocentric, a prima donna, an idealist, a radical. His content or his basics were never absorbed

DOUGLAS FISHER



and presented with any thoroughness in the popular media.

He was a very difficult man to work with, largely because he was so absolute. Further, he lacked the one pervasive, peculiarly Canadian talent. He didn't compromise easily. Consequently he was a lousy "committee man" in sport where acceptance of new ideas requires infinite patience, much "buttering" and endless touching of the cap to various personal bases of position and power.

Lloyd was without the patience of the diplomat. He was too experimental and eclectic on the scientific aspects of sport for the men in the physical education faculties in Canada. He was too positive, and insistent for the "badgers" in the oligarchies of amateur sport. He frightened the senior administrators in government with the sweep of his plans.

Although this seems to be a catalogue of failure for Percival and misunderstanding of him by those who should have appreciated him, in my judgment Lloyd Percival was one of the half-dozen great Canadians of the past 30 years. On my desk I have an unpublished brief of his, over 300 pages long, which he presented to the Federal Government in 1970. It was entitled "Development Needs of Sports and Fitness in Canada." As much as any other effort by an individual it moved Ottawa to expand its spending on programs in the field of sport.

It was not the first but the seventh or eighth major proposal Percival had taken to the mandarins of Ottawa.

Even on those to whom he was anathema, Percival made his mark. He irritated them into defensive positions: He also made them think, at least a little.

At the time his hockey handbook was published he was rolling with his finest success, the CBC radio feature, Sports College. It took the air each week on hundreds of successive Saturdays. Its membership built up to 600,000 and even higher. Its correspondence averaged 5,000 letters a week at the high point.

The confident didacticism of the "head coach" caught and energized a generation of Canadian boys. His material was ordered for mid-teen understanding. The prose in the instructions and the bulletins was terse and clear. Each phase of almost every game or event was reduced to fundamentals and then presented in step-by-step details. Both the broadcasts and the published material were infused with vernacular and popular psychology.

The language was studded with words like "tactics strategy, firepower". The study and exploitation of competitors and their weaknesses and strengths was implicit and underlined.

Lloyd Percival believed that if the rules and traditions of sport do not forbid it, any behavior was permissible in order to win, so long as it did not contradict the social and legal code.

To those who now are saying, writing or feeling that the country did not appreciate the worth of Lloyd Percival there remains the challenge of his body of work.

The hockey people might look again at the hockey handbook. Coaches in all sports and the sportswriters might plough what was really his "magnum opus" the proceedings of the first international symposium of the art and science of coaching which he and Joe Taylor organized and edited so thoroughly after it was held in 1971.