

Deacon White, Sportsman

By

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IN 1906, A TOURING BASEBALL TEAM from Anacortes, Washington, visited Edmonton to play an exhibition game. They were greeted enthusiastically by a large crowd and one of the players was so impressed that he decided to stay. His name was William Freeman "Deacon" White and his decision was to have an enormous bearing on the development of Edmonton sport for the next twenty years. White continued to play baseball and later became deeply involved in a number of other sports, notably football and hockey. Although he coached and managed different teams with a great deal of success until the late 1920s, his most significant contribution came as a sports promoter. Largely as a result of his efforts, Edmonton was able to compete successfully against much larger cities in the sporting arena.

Deacon White was born in Chicago in 1878. He attended North Western University then taught mathematics at the University of Chicago for several years before venturing west to Washington. There he joined a semi-professional touring baseball team from Anacortes and made his fateful journey to Edmonton. At this time the city had a population of only 15,000. Despite its size and its relative youth, Edmonton had already developed a healthy sporting appetite. Baseball was especially popular and local games regularly drew crowds worthy of a larger city, much to the delight of the city council who realized that sport provided a useful promotional tool for the city.

Soon after White's arrival, Diamond Park was completed in the Ross Flats area and Edmonton now had a proper venue for a variety of sports, especially baseball. Deacon lost little time in becoming involved and in 1907 he played a major role in starting the Western Canadian Baseball League (WCBL) a semi-professional tour that included franchises in Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat.¹ This league soon aroused a great deal of interest especially during a close race at the finish of the season between Edmonton and Medicine Hat. Deacon was still a team

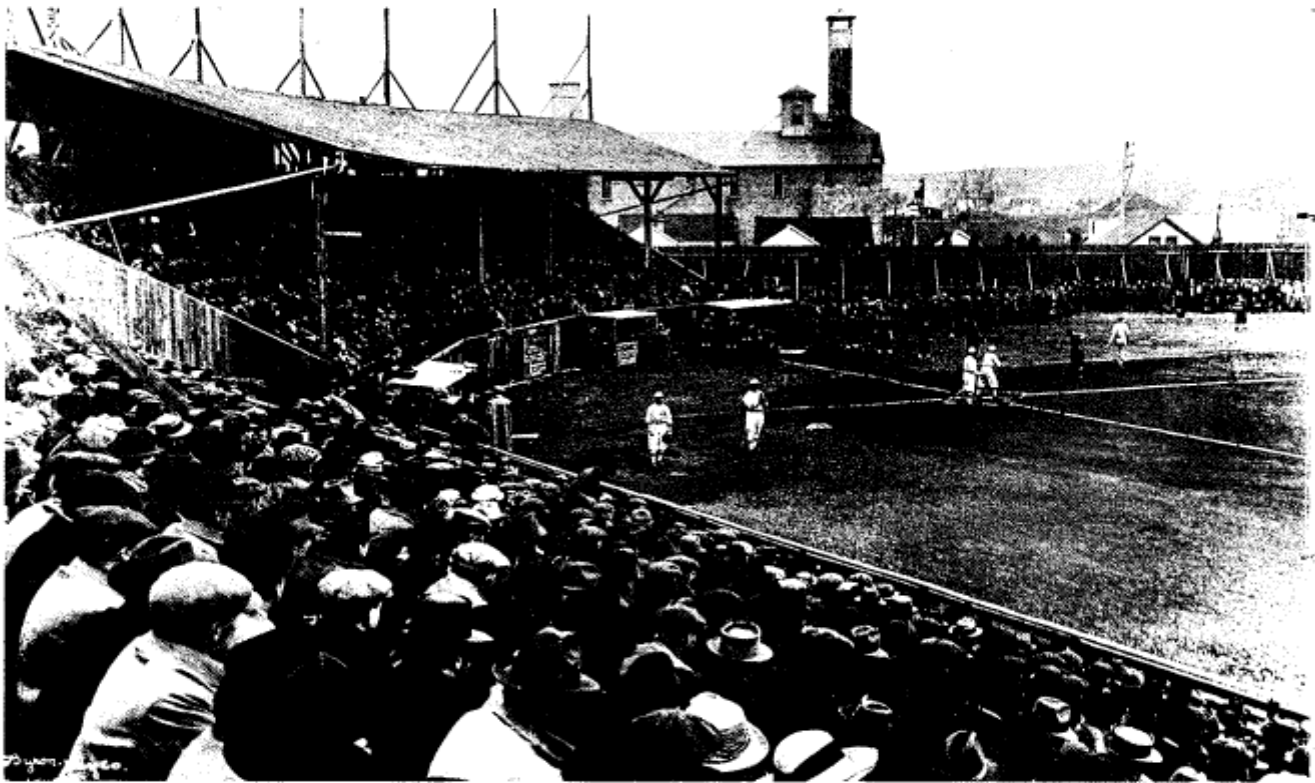
member at this time and he continued to combine the roles of player, coach and administrator until 1910.

Despite its initial success in 1907, the WCBL failed to operate for the next year. By this time White had become involved in another sporting endeavor, for in this year he is believed to have had a hand in founding the Eskimos Football Club. For this he solicited the assistance of two local politicians, Joseph O'Driscoll and Joseph Clarke, who later joined the executive committee of the club.² Clarke, who later gave his name to the present Clarke Stadium, showed a keen interest in sport and at one time served as secretary/treasurer of the Edmonton baseball team.³ In the Eskimos' first year of existence, with Deacon White as coach, the football team defeated the Calgary Tigers to win the Alberta Rugby Championship.

The revival of the WCBL in 1909 may have consumed more of Deacon White's time and his involvement in football seems to have waned for several years. The baseball league now included eight teams as Winnipeg, Moose Jaw, Regina and Brandon joined the original four.⁴ Despite some financial difficulties, the WCBL managed to survive until 1914 and by 1911, White had assumed the coaching responsibilities for the Edmonton team. He was well respected around the league and quite probably a driving force in its survival. White was well known not only in western Canadian baseball circles but also in the United States and was responsible for the importation of a number of junior prospects from the big leagues.

While successful in sports, Deacon still depended on the operation of a cigar store and billiards parlour, located on Jasper Avenue, in order to survive. The year 1913 proved to be a highly suc-

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Opening day of the Western Canadian baseball League at Diamond Park, Edmonton, in the 1920s. Edmonton is set to play Saskatoon. Deacon White was the inspiration behind the league.

successful one for Edmonton sports and for Deacon White. His involvement with local baseball increased when Frank Gray, the owner of the Edmonton baseball franchise, gave up in despair after the team's poor showing. With the assistance of William McGrath and Joseph Clarke, White was able to establish the Joint Stock Edmonton Recreation Company.⁵ The baseball franchise was thus able to survive and at the season opener in 1914, the team drew a crowd of 5,000 to Diamond Park.⁶ In the same year, White renewed his association with the Eskimos Football Club and the team went on to win the provincial championship, defeating the Calgary Hillhurst club in Red Deer before a large crowd, many of whom had journeyed south to support the team.

It was not unusual for Deacon White to be associated with baseball and football for as a youth he was outstanding in both games.⁷ However, he had no previous experience with hockey so his relationship with that sport reveals the true extent of his abilities. In the summer of 1913, he was responsible for the formation of the north side Eskimos Hockey Club. Despite his limited knowledge of the game his talent as an administrator and promoter once again proved invaluable as the team

progressed to the semi-finals of the national Allan Cup series.⁸ The Eskimos were able to attract large crowds to their home games, thanks to the completion of the Edmonton Stock Pavilion. Its suitability for a number of sports was ensured by the design assistance given by Deacon who was considered to be extremely knowledgeable on the subject.⁹ On Christmas Day 1912, White and a prominent city business man, Walter Campbell, organized the first game of hockey in the arena.

The advent of World War One temporarily halted almost all sporting competition in Edmonton. White joined the local 49th Battalion and served in Belgium and France.¹⁰ Even in the army his involvement with sport did not end, as he was put in charge of organizing recreational baseball for Canadian troops. While he conducted clinics and organized games he was able to recognize and recruit a number of promising athletes who returned with him after the war. The most notable of these was Gordon "Duke" Keats who later became a legendary hockey figure in Edmonton.¹¹

White returned home in 1919 and soon became involved in organizing a four team semi-professional baseball league. The Edmonton team was known as "Deacon's Veterans," not an un-

common name at the time, referring to the fact that the team included some of Deacon's recruits from the army. In 1920 he was able to revive the Western Canadian Baseball League which ran until 1922 but did not enjoy a great deal of popularity. While baseball was Deacon White's first love, unfortunately some of the teams in the league failed to attract the crowds necessary to survive. So in 1922 he became president, secretary/treasurer and statistician of a new Western International Baseball League composed of teams from Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver and Tacoma. The league folded half way through the season when Tacoma withdrew and despite all of White's efforts, no further professional baseball was played in Edmonton during his lifetime.¹²

At the same time that White was promoting baseball, he remained involved with the Eskimos hockey and football teams. Of the two, the Eskimos Football Club gave him his biggest coaching success. In 1920, he began to recruit players from such universities as Ohio State and Queens as well as from various United States high schools.¹³ He even managed to recruit a player from a rival Calgary team, an event which prompted an inquiry to prove that the player had moved, not only to play, but for employment reasons.¹⁴ It was at this time that future stars such as Moe Lieberman, Punch Dickens, Art Creighton and Victor Yancey began to appear in the Eskimos line up.

By 1921, Deacon White had assembled a great team and his hard work began to pay off. The Eskimos dominated all western opposition, defeating the Calgary Tigers 72-2 early in the season, and progressing to the western final in Winnipeg where they beat the home team 16-6. The Eskimos' success generated enormous enthusiasm in Edmonton and a civic campaign was started to fund a challenge for the Grey Cup. Eventually a generous donation from the local Rotary Club enabled the Eskimos to journey east, becoming the first western team to challenge for the trophy.¹⁵ In December they met the vaunted Toronto Argonauts whose team included the great Lionel Conacher. The Eskimos were humiliated 33-0 but this did not stop Edmonton fans from packing the local theatres to listen to telegram reports of the game. On their return to the city, Deacon White and his team received an enthusiastic welcome. Despite the loss,



Deacon White, in 1926

White had managed to provide a visible form of success that exhibited Edmonton's progress to the rest of the country; he had also transformed the Grey Cup final into an East-West confrontation.

In 1922, the Eskimos again reigned supreme in the West and once again they traveled East for the Grey Cup. This time they were beaten 13-1 by Queens University. The financial backing needed for the trip was provided through a deal with the Edmonton Elks Club. Deacon's promotional abilities enabled him to secure the money for the journey in return for renaming the team the "Elks."¹⁶ In 1923, the Eskimos continued to dominate but there was no challenge for the Grey Cup perhaps due to a lack of money or to the discouraging results of the previous years.

During this time, White remained involved with several other sports. In 1923 the Eskimos Hockey Club, which he had helped build, challenged Ottawa for the Stanley Cup. Although they were unsuccessful, the Eskimos continued to entertain the crowds with top class hockey for a number of years.¹⁷ In the same year, White organized a basketball exhibition that proved to be enormously important to Edmonton's sporting heritage.

The Edmonton Commercial Grads had become Canadian women's basketball champions in 1922 and they retained their title the following year. In

spite of their success, they had failed to capture the attention of a large segment of the Edmonton public. Deacon White was quick to see the potential for greater civic involvement and his promotional skills enabled him to convince the Cleveland Favorite Knits to travel to Edmonton to play the Grads for the Underwood Trophy, unofficially the world championship of women's basketball. White promised to cover the Cleveland team's expenses out of anticipated gate receipts from the series. He was not disappointed as 11,000 fans crowded into the arena to watch the Grads win the two game series. The team had begun its world domination and because they were now in the public eye, many more opportunities for travel opened up as the gate receipts from home games began to cover their expenses.

Deacon White had reached the pinnacle of his career in the early 1920s. By 1924, he was content to take a less active role, although in 1926 he received permission to hang a banner advertising an Eskimo's hockey game across Jasper Avenue. Typically, the advertisement was meant to benefit not only the hockey game but also the City Street Car Co. who would transport spectators to the arena.¹⁸ Without his leadership however, the Eskimos Football Club was unable to survive and the team folded until 1928.

During the late 1920s, the University of Alberta offered White the chair of physical education but he declined the offer, saying that he was too much of a baseball man and that his disorganized lifestyle would be an unsuitable example for students to follow.¹⁹ His one vice appears to have been gambling and in 1928, he was arrested and found guilty of running a gambling house known as the Crocus Club.²⁰ There is no indication that he ever let this side of his private life interfere with his sporting commitments. In fact, his reason for refusing the physical education chair only serves to substantiate his high sporting morals. White was a man of strong character and a rare sort of honesty. Contract disputes between Deacon and his players were unheard of and in many cases his word carried as much weight as any document. He had once refused to attend a baseball game at Diamond Park because a player implicated in a previous scandal was allowed to play.²¹

Deacon White's eyesight began to fail and by 1928, his health deteriorated, he returned to Chicago where he died in November 1939.

His record of achievements in Edmonton sports is remarkable even today. Deacon White's tenure in the city coincided with a very rapid growth in population which increased the potential for sporting entertainment. However, it was White's



Deacon White, second left, is seen here with the Edmonton Eskimo rugby club in 1922. In that year they were Grey Cup finalists.

expertise in a number of areas that developed this potential into a series of highly successful teams that represented the city at a national and international level. He understood how to generate and promote enthusiasm by recognizing both the desire of Edmontonians to share in a team's success and the team's need for the financial support of the crowd. Deacon White maintained a genuine concern for Edmonton's sporting welfare at all times. Perhaps the most important aspect of his success is the strong foundation that he left behind for future generations of players, coaches and administrators in the city.

NOTES

1. A. Enger, "The History of Baseball in the Province of Alberta," unpublished paper, n.d., p. 69. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton.
2. Carl Betke, "Sports Promotion in the Western Canadian City: The Example of Early Edmonton," *Urban History Review*, no. 3, 1977, p. 54.
3. Ibid.
4. Enger, unpublished paper, p. 70.
5. Betke, 1977, p. 54.
6. Ibid.
7. Enger, unpublished paper, p. 84.
8. Carl Betke, "The Development of Urban Community in Prairie Canada: Edmonton 1898-1921," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, 1974, p. 421.
9. Betke, 1977, p. 53.
10. Enger, unpublished paper, p. 84.
11. Interview with John Ducey, by J. McIsaac, n.d., Edmonton City Archives.
12. Enger, unpublished paper, p. 84.
13. Betke, 1974, p. 594.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 595.
16. James G. MacGregor, *Edmonton, A History*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1967, p. 229.
17. Ibid., p. 230.
18. Letter, Deacon White to Edmonton City Commissioner, 1926. W.A. Griesbach file, Edmonton City Archives.
19. Interview with John Ducey, op.cit.
20. Edmonton City Police report, 1928. Edmonton City Archives.
21. Interview with John Ducey, op.cit.

VIOLENCE AND HOCKEY

After a hockey match played last winter at Fort Saskatchewan, some of the Mounted Police and one H. Calvert and some of his friends, while refreshing themselves in the Mansion House, got into an animated altercation which, with lightning-like rapidity, developed into an exhibition of pugilistic ability, commonly called a "scrap".

During the exchange of compliments which speedily passed, some of the participants had their countenances unavoidably "hand painted," Const. Brown in particular, his proboscis being completely wrecked. The result was that he laid an information against H. Calvert for assault and brought his story and his damaged physiognomy into the police court, with the result that Calvert was found guilty.

From this decision Calvert appealed and the appeal came before his Honor on Friday. After listening to a great deal of contradictory evidence, giving the story of the "scrap" in all its gruesome details, Mr. Justice Scott quashed the conviction of the J.P. and ordered that each party pay their own costs.

— *Edmonton Bulletin*, March 29, 1897