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The Development of Sporting Interests in Otago's Early Years

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New Zealanders are known as a sports-minded if not sports-loving people. In any case a very high percentage of the population is interested in some form of sport and many New Zealanders have attained the ranks of greatness in the sporting world. It could be maintained that the climate and the physical characteristics of the country are a stimulation.

The rigours of early colonisation and settlement certainly necessitated good health and strength, and physical fitness was a natural development.

In what was eventually to become the Otago Province, those who arrived by the *John Wickliffe* and the *Philip Laing* and by the vessels that came later in the year 1848 made slow but none the less steady progress in their pioneering tasks. A fair measure of prosperity had attended their efforts and as the severe conditions of that first winter passed to the brighter prospects of spring and summer the spirits of the settlers likewise rose and arrangements were made for a fitting celebration of the first anniversary of their arrival. A programme was drawn up for the 23rd and 24th of March. It is recorded that as well as Church Services, athletic and aquatic sports were held on the first day and horse racing on the second. The races were held on St. Kilda Beach. Although some of the horses bolted and others threw their riders, a good day's outing with side attractions and amusements provided plenty of enjoyment.

Among the early arrivals were some to whom the game of cricket was not unknown and during that first summer a number were attracted to this pastime. As part of the celebration of that first New Year's Day, 1849 a match was arranged between married and single players. The result was an easy victory for the single men, the principal feature of the game being the batting and bowling of Mr. C. H. Kettle, the Otago surveyor.

Horses naturally played a very important part in the early days of settlement. Although they were not plentiful, there had been nevertheless some very fine steeds brought over from Australia and various owners were ever keen to try out their purchases against competitors. Horse racing became quite an attraction in the fifties. The beach not providing a very suitable track, the races were later held on what is now the Montecillo Football Ground, where successful meetings were held in 1849, 1850, 1852, 1856 and 1859. In the sixties the meetings were transferred to the Taieri, principally at Silverstream, and the Otago Jockey Club, later to become the Dunedin Jockey Club came into existence. Race meetings were also held near Mosgiel and on April 23, 1858, a race meeting was held at Clarendon, at the south end of Lake Waihola where a settlement had sprung up round a landing place for goods transported by boat for the south.

Boating on the Harbour was both a necessary means of travel and a pastime, and occasional boat races led to the formation of a Boating Club the first regatta being held at Port Chalmers as early as March 27, 1850. Whale boats, long boats, rowing boats and Maori canoes all took part. Regattas became annual functions and by the eighties boat racing was a popular sport. In February, 1881, an interprovincial boat race held on the Taieri River between Otago and Canterbury was won by the latter by a narrow margin. Associated with boat racing and rowing in aquatic events of the eighties was swimming, and interest in this sport led to the opening of City Bathing Pools at Pelichet Bay and St. Clair in December 1884.

Although in the first few years of settlement the population was mostly in and around Dunedin, settlers were also establishing themselves in country districts that possessed agricultural and pastoral possibilities. At the Taieri, Tokomairiro, and the Clutha the number of settlers was steadily increasing and the difficulties of travel caused these communities to develop their own

social and sporting interests. The first ploughing contest was held at Tokomairiro on April 18 1856 when £25 in prize money was distributed. Bullock teams predominated but there were also several horse teams. The Taieri Agricultural Society was constituted in December 1860 and equestrian skill was demonstrated at the first show of stock held at Tokomairiro in February 1861.

The total population of the province at the beginning of the year 1861 was still small, but rumours of the finding of gold and Government inducements to find it had an unsettling effect upon a number of arrivals. From that remarkable day of May 1861 when Gabriel Read washed out nearly ten pounds worth of gold from some gravel and sand at the Tuapeka, afterwards to become famous as Gabriel's Gully, a complete change took place in the population. The news of the discovery of a rich goldfield in Otago spread like wildfire and Dunedin became the mecca of a vast concourse of immigrants. In a very short time the population of the province leaped from twelve to thirty thousand, the majority trekking into the country districts to search for the precious metal. At Wetherstones, not far from Gabriel's Gully, where another rich strike was made, a town with a population around 5,000 sprang up in a few months with banks, shops, hotels (14 of them) boarding houses and places of amusement for people of all ages and of both sexes. Games of chance and skill were played, tournaments were held and sports of all kinds were indulged in. These included wrestling, running, jumping, quoits, pole jumping, tossing the caber, piping, highland dancing and shooting. It is recorded that on occasions a day would be set aside for sports and outdoor entertainment. Side shows and all other amusements would be abandoned while the sports meeting was in progress, but at night the place blazed with candles and lamps and to the music of bagpipes, fiddles, banjos and guitars, singing and dancing combined to make the night merry. Gold was being dug from the claims, money was plentiful, liquor was readily obtained, spirits were high, blood was often spilt, and the great variety of "gold diggers" gave themselves over to amusement and relaxation. Prosperity had come to Otago and both in the city and throughout the country the increase in population intensified interest in sport as a happy diversion from labour and as a means of social contact with friends and neighbours.

One of the earliest and most popular indoor amusements in the winter period was the game of Billiards which could be played at any hour of the day or night. Billiard saloons sprang up in Dunedin and in the country townships and matches were arranged. Big stakes were often involved. In a match at the Princess Theatre, Dunedin, between two contestants named Lamb and Townsend the stake was £500 a side ; Lamb won by a narrow margin. Townsend however was a sport of many parts. He was also a racing enthusiast and it is recorded that he challenged a Mr. Julius to a three mile horse race for £6,000 a side. The race was run at Silver-stream in August 1862 when Julius's bay gelding "Kauri Gum" beat Townsend's "Falcon" by six lengths, time 7 mins 5½secs. In March 1863, the principal event at another Race Meeting was a Champion Race of 1,000 Sovs, which was won by a horse called "Ladybird". Throughout the sixties race meetings were held on the Taieri, the first race meeting at Forbury taking place on March 23 and 24, 1871. The Jockey Club races continued to be held there until December 27 and 28, 1898, when the venue shifted to Wingatui when the first meeting was held on March 22, 23 and 25, 1899. Race meetings were also held at Waikouaiti and in the Tuapeka district as early as 1865.

Although sports gatherings with athletic events were held in the fifties the first recorded Caledonian games took place on New Year's Day 1863 and with the increase in the number of young men, interest in athletic sports grew each year. On July 28, 1873, the North Recreation Ground was the venue for a 100 yards race for the Championship of New Zealand. It was won by a runner named Fox by two yards in 10¾ secs.

The North Recreation Ground was also the training ground of Joe Scott, a Dunedin lad who in his thirteenth year wrested the walking championship of New Zealand from J.

Spence the then champion and under the able coaching of Alfred Austin, an enthusiastic member of the Dunedin Caledonian Society went on to establish records as a long distance walker that have not since been equalled. In London, in May 1888, he won the coveted Silver Belt, now displayed in the Early Settlers' Museum, for the Walking Championship of the world by covering a distance of 363 miles 1,510 yards in 72 hours. Wrestling was also a popular sport at sports gatherings throughout the province in the sixties and at Caledonian meetings in the seventies there were keen contests. The chief styles were Catch-ascatch-can, Collar-and-elbow and Cumberland. Cornishmen were particularly keen wrestlers and contests between leading wrestlers at Caledonian gatherings in Dunedin and in the mining towns created great interest. The main attraction at the Caledonian Society's meeting in Dunedin in January 1879 was the presence of the New Zealand Champion, Tyson, who retained his title against several contenders. Right through to the nineties wrestling contests drew large crowds and the appearance of Donald Dinnie, another famous athlete at Otago Sports gatherings in 1884, created wide interest.

Although wild pigs, native ducks and pigeons and swamp turkeys or pukeko provided sport and an occasional meal for shooters, it was not until the liberation of Black swans on Lake Waiholo in 1865 and the introduction of rabbits to Southland in July 1866, that this sport really developed. Both the swans and the rabbits found conditions to their liking and multiplied rapidly, and it was not long before they became popular targets for those with sporting guns not only in Southland but also in Otago. Interest in shooting in fact developed quite a lot in the sixties and competitive shooting contests were arranged. The first competitive Rifle Meeting in Otago was held on April 17 1865. Interest in shooting led to the formation of volunteer groups and Dr. Fulton in his book "Medical Practice in the Early Days" records that the Volunteer movement in Otago really originated with a public meeting in Tokomairiro in January 1860. When Militia Districts were proclaimed, units were formed in Dunedin and on the Taieri and at the Clutha. The use of horses as a means of travelling to parades led to the formation of cavalry troops and the Otago Light Horse and the Otago Hussars.

The waters of the harbour and the coast provided good fishing for fishing enthusiasts and the rivers provided plenty of eels, but inland the streams and rivers were devoid of fish of any size. The idea of stocking the rivers with trout developed in the middle sixties and the first trout ova were brought over from Tasmania and liberated in September 1867. In a few years trout fishing became another sporting interest, but it was not legalised until December 1874.

The first red deer were brought to Otago by the vessel *City of Dunedin* in January 1871, and it was not long before they also provided a sporting interest for shooters.

Following close on the importation of rabbits came the introduction of hares. At first they were used for Greyhound Coursing, a Coursing Meeting being held at Edendale on May 13, 1876. Some of the hares escaped and joined the rabbits in the hills but they did not multiply so rapidly and authority to shoot them had to be obtained. Several prosecutions, including some well known identities, took place in 1878 for shooting hares out of season. Interest in Coursing however increased and followers of the sport commenced importing and breeding Greyhounds for the purpose. In the eighties Championship Meetings were held, the coveted prize being the Waterloo Cup which was eventually won outright by James MacDonlad of Milburn at one time member of the House of Representatives for Bruce. Interest in coursing was still keen in the nineties, the Champion Stakes Meeting usually being held in the month of August.

While cricket enthusiasts continued from that first summer of 1848-49 to find enjoyment with bat and ball it was not till the influx of younger men in the sixties that the game really took a hold. In the summers of 1862 and 1863 cricket was quite a popular game, and in 1864 the visit of an all England Eleven, financed by a well known Dunedin figure, Dr.

Shadrach Jones, stimulated great public interest, the match against 22 Otago players being won by the England Eleven by nine wickets. Sporting interests continued to increase with the young people and in the seventies friendly matches of both rugby football and cricket were played. Towards the end of the seventies there were a number of both cricket and football clubs. The "Otago Witness" of January 15th, 1876, records that at the Otokia School picnic a football match took place between the single and the married men, with married men winning. The visit of an Australian Cricket team to Dunedin in January 1881 created great interest. Many of those who played cricket turned to football in the winter and on March 26 1881 a meeting of football club representatives was held to form an Otago Rugby Football Union and a competition was organised for club premiership. The visit of a New South Wales rugby team in 1882 heightened interest in the game and when the Otago representative players defeated them in a match at Mosgiel on September 23, by a goal and three tries to nil the rugby game got a great boost. In 1883, interprovincial matches were held, a contest between Otago and Auckland in September of that year resulting in a draw. In 1884 a New Zealand team was sent to Australia where it had a very successful series of games. Cricket also provided several important matches from the eighties onwards, but rugby football interest spread more generally throughout the province and gradually became the main sporting attraction. The Association game also flourished for some years, from the late eighties and onwards, but failed to raise the same enthusiasm as rugby.

An occasional game of bowls by a few enthusiasts led to the formation of the Dunedin Bowling Club in March 1873, and in the winter season of 1874 Curling on the ice ponds was tried and a Curling Club was formed at Leith Valley. In August 1881, Dunedin curlers tried their skill in a match with a Mt. Ida team at Naseby, but were defeated by the Central Otago stalwarts by 28 to 17.

Like Bowling, tennis was one of the games that was slow in starting. The first games were played with bats on private garden lawns. Some of the bats used were covered with leather or sheep skin. When the Bowlers started preparing greens the tennis enthusiasts also laid out playing lawns. During the eighties both games became popular and clubs were formed in country centres as well as in the city. It was not until the beginning of the present century however that hard tennis courts came into use.

Although running and walking contests were sporting features of the seventies and eighties it was not until the late eighties that cycling developed as a sporting interest. Bicycle races took place at sports meetings in the early nineties, but it was not till the late nineties that road cycle racing developed. It is recorded however that at the beginning of April 1893, J. Currie rode a pneumatic safety bicycle from Dunedin to Invercargill, a distance of 134 miles, in 18i hours. Considering the condition of the road at that time it was not a bad effort. From the beginning of the present century Otago with the rest of New Zealand has really taken a place amongst the great sporting nations of the world.