

150+ YEARS IN THE MAKING A BRIEF HISTORY OF 'EXCELSIOR' LACROSSE IN BRAMPTON

Mark Evans

'Excelsior' lacrosse has provided an important venue for some very exciting sports action in the Brampton community since 1871. Programs have continued to evolve as boys and girls, men and women have been provided with opportunities to play Canada's national summer sport, and for some, occasions to pursue their passion for the sport at provincial, national, and international levels. Under the auspices of the Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club (BELC) and the Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association (BMLA), 'Excelsior' lacrosse in Brampton holds the enviable legacy of being one of the longer-running 'amateur' community sports clubs in Canada and remains an important part of Brampton's distinctive character. This rich heritage continues today albeit under shifting circumstances.

First play on the streets of Brampton, late 1860s

Perkins Bull, author of *From Rattlesnake Hunt To Hockey: The History of Sports in Canada and of the Sportsmen of Peel, 1798 to 1934*, noted that lacrosse was introduced into the area around Brampton as early as 1865. The first lacrosse stick was brought into Brampton, according to Bull, by Harry W. Dawson in the late 1860s. "Young Dawson," Bull claimed, had been "attending a professional match in Toronto, in the company of his father," and "secured a lacrosse stick from the trainer of one of the teams. Dawson had a busy time for the next week or so, lending it to small boys who pleaded for a chance to try it" (Perkins Bull, p. 372).

Brief mentions of lacrosse began to appear in the *Brampton Times*, the local newspaper, noting upcoming local and provincial matches, the sale of "La Crosse" sticks, and brief descriptions of games, providing the initial glimpses into the game's emergence in the town. The "Excelsior" name was first introduced in 1871, according to Bull, by George M. Lee, second Master at Brampton High School. Lee had organized a team there and at his suggestion, the team adopted the designation from Longfellow's poem, *Excelsior* (1841). The 'Excelsior' moniker and its' meaning, 'more lofty, still higher, ever upwards' was set in motion.

The form of the 'ball and stick' game that was to emerge in south-eastern Ontario, and eventually in the village of Brampton, was derived from a mixture of forms initially practiced by Indigenous Nations (Iroquois, Abenaki, and Huron) who lived in the eastern Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River valley regions and later, by settler populations in these regions (present day Québec, Ontario, and upstate New York) in the middle and last half of the 19th C.

First 'Excelsiors'

The Excelsiors' first win came in June 1871 against the Second Twelve of the Ontario Club. Lacrosse became a principal community attraction, with many memorable contests taking place. At the time, adaptations to the Indigenous

game were changing in terms of its more traditional purposes and how it had been played. A more structured field game with specific positions, team play, and a consistent set of rules was emerging. Generally, games were decided by the scoring of the first goal of each game, in a best 3 out of 5 game format, the team winning three games being declared the winner.

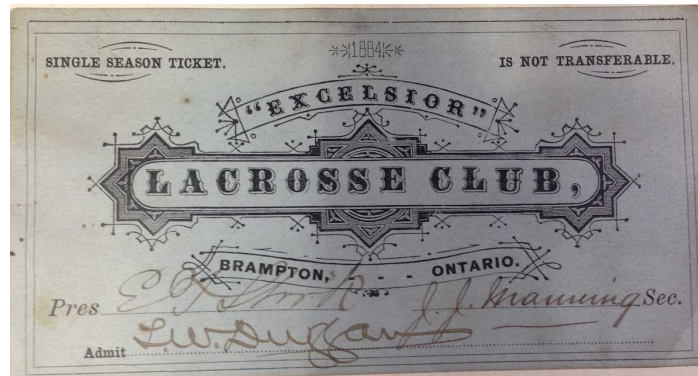
Lacrosse was expanding in the town by the late 1870s to include junior and senior teams. More structured schedules with outside-town teams and more formalized roles and responsibilities within the Excelsior organization itself were established. Two Junior teams, the “Young Sharpers” and the “Young Excelsiors”, existed in Brampton, playing against each other and teams from nearby communities, like the “Old Stockings” from Georgetown and the “Maple Leafs” from Toronto.



First Excelsiors

Lacrosse across Canada was expanding at the same time. In 1880, the National Lacrosse Association (NLA), an amateur organization, was formed. A senior league was organized across Ontario and a series of provincial district championship schedules arranged. In 1887, the Canadian Lacrosse Association (CLA) was formed. New rules were introduced, and seasons were 6 to 8 games for the different divisions (Junior, intermediate & senior).

Lacrosse programs in Brampton continued to grow and integrate with broader provincial reorganization initiatives. The senior Excelsiors' won their first Ontario Western District championships in early 1880s, defeating teams from across southern Ontario. Provincial championship honours were first earned by the intermediate Excelsiors in the 1890s. Seasons' tickets were available on an annual basis.



Excelsiors' Season Ticket, 1884



Courtesy J. R. Fallis

EXCELSIOR CLUB, BRAMPTON, 1893

*Dr. Ed. Peaker, Dr. J. G. Roberts, Dr. Ken Peaker, William Dawson
 Dr. D. L. Heggie, William Stewart, Sam McClure, Fred Milner, Robert Stewart
 Billy Kelly, James R. Fallis, William J. Allen, G. A. Stewart*

Provincial Champions - 1893

Various challenges, however, threatened the growth of lacrosse at the time and public interest waned. Spectator interference, ineligible players, excessive roughness, playing conditions, questionable officiating, and the influence of betting, for example, were noted concerns. Nonetheless, Brampton emerged as an influential centre for the early development of lacrosse in Ontario.

The formative years

The advent of the 20th century saw lacrosse emerge as a dominant sport in Brampton and across Canada. Amateur and professional leagues emerged, and

club teams routinely travelled from Québec and Ontario to British Columbia and vice versa. The Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association (OALA) was organized in 1913 by the amalgamation of the Canadian Lacrosse Association and the Ontario Lacrosse Association. The Globe Shield, emblematic of senior series amateur lacrosse supremacy in Ontario at the time, was captured by the senior Excelsiors in 1912, 1913, and 1914. The Shield was retired in 1938 and is on display at the Ontario Lacrosse Hall of Fame in St. Catharines.



Excelsior Lacrosse Club, Brampton, Ontario's Globe Shield Champions, 1914

Lacrosse honours for the Excelsiors continued throughout the 1920s. In 1922, the Brampton junior team won their first Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association Championship. In 1926, the senior team captured the provincial Dominion Championship. The Mann Cup, the top honour in Canadian lacrosse, first arrived in Brampton in 1930, the Senior Excelsiors defeating the New Westminster Salmonbellies in a three-game series at Varsity Stadium, attended by over 20,000 spectators. That same year both the Intermediate and Junior Excelsiors captured provincial championships. The senior team was to go on to win a second Mann Cup in 1931.



NEW WESTMINSTER <small>(Salmon Bellies) Colors—Salmon</small>	POSITIONS	BRAMPTON EXCELSIORS <small>Colors—Red and White</small>
1. G. MACKIE	Goal	1. BERT LARGE
2. CARL GRAUER	Point	2. STEW BEATTY
4. WILLIS PATCHELL	Cover Point	16. TEDDY REEVES
15. W. MERCER	First Defence	4. BERT BERRY
5. RED FRASER	Second Defence	5. PETE ELLA
3. STEW GIFFORD	Third Defence	8. OLLIE BURTON
7. A. BROWN	Centre	9. CECIL STAPLETON
16. HADDY STODDART	Third Home	15. JERRY KENDALL
8. JOHNNY VERNON	Second Home	10. HANK GOUDIE
10. GEORGE FEENEY	First Home	6. MOONEY GIBSON
12. JACK WOODS	Outside Home	11. NORM ZIMMER
11. SUNNY DOUGLAS	Inside Home	17. GEORGE SPROULE
6. R. MACKIE	Alternates	3. FORRESTOR WILSON
13. W. HILL	"	7. BILL O'HEARN
14. J. FRASER	"	8. BOB JENNINGS
17. R. DIXON	"	12. MUSH THOMPSON
	"	13. ELGIN CORE
	"	14. BERT POWELL

TEAMS	1st Quarter	2nd Quarter	3rd Quarter	4th Quarter	TOTAL
BRAMPTON EXCELSIORS					
NEW WESTMINSTER					

Referees—Charlie Querrin, Toronto and Rudy Grauer, Vancouver

Canadian 'Mann Cup' Program and Line-Up, 1930

From box to field

Brampton's lacrosse history took a 'giant' shift in the early 1930s. As the field game was beginning to show signs of decline across Canada, builders, players, and promoters of the game began to consider new directions to revive the traditional field game. By the early 1930s, a new 'box' orientation to the game was formally introduced. The new game consisted of two teams, 7 players aside, one being the goaltender, and was played on an indoor arena surface (or an outdoor bowl) in the summer months, borrowing heavily from the ice hockey format. Field and box lacrosse coexisted in Brampton in the early 1930s until the field game was gradually phased out. Rosalea Park, Brampton's designated field lacrosse grounds, was replaced in 1937 with the building of Brampton's first outdoor box, the 'Rose Bowl.' It wasn't uncommon to have 3,000 spectators at a Saturday afternoon game as the town virtually came to a stand-still. Programs for youth became increasingly evident in Brampton during this time

and informal connections to the Ontario Lacrosse Association (OLA) were introduced. Local teams mostly played field lacrosse and were organized by town wards or by street names (e.g. the Wellingtons, the Church St. Challengers). The Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association (BMLA) was founded in 1943 and officially entered the Ontario Minor Lacrosse Association in 1946. Jim Clevely, E.W. 'Billy' Evans, Lloyd 'Baldy' Ewles, Walter Smart, 'Mush' Thompson, and many others guided this next stage.

Brampton's third Mann Cup and first 'box' lacrosse title was a collaborative effort when the Mimico-Brampton Combines defeated the New Westminster Salmonbellies at Maple Leaf Gardens in 1942.

While senior play was limited by the war different successes were experienced by Excelsior teams during the 1940s. While leagues carried on with fewer players and games, cancellation of play was the norm. A consequence at the senior level was the joining of the Mimico and Brampton senior teams in 1942 and 1943 to become the Mimico-Brampton Combines and in 1945 the Brampton Seniors combined with Lakeshore. The Senior Excelsiors had their own team the other years of the 1940s with the exception of 1949. The Junior Excelsiors continued throughout the decade as did youth teams in Brampton, in fact, the Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association (BMLA) was established in 1943. Both Mimico and Lakeshore are geographically close to Brampton. Thus while limited by the impact of the War the junior teams continued throughout.

Four Minto Cups in the 50s

Brampton Memorial Arena was built on Elliott St. in 1949 and opened in 1950. It was built to honour those who lost their lives in the Second World War and soon became home floor of the Excelsiors. National championship fever struck again in 1952 when the junior Excelsiors won their first Canadian 'Minto Cup' competition, the top Junior A lacrosse championship award for Canada, defeating New Westminster.

A second outdoor lacrosse box for Brampton's youngest players was built in 1952 on the site of the YMCA in Rosalea Park, replacing the original bowl. Little did lacrosse builders know that they were laying the foundation for Brampton's future junior lacrosse supremacy later in that decade. Junior Excelsior teams, coached by 'Mush' Thompson, dominated lacrosse in Canada in the late 1950s, winning four consecutive Eastern Canadian Junior Championships and three consecutive Minto Cup Canadian Championships, from 1957 to 1959.



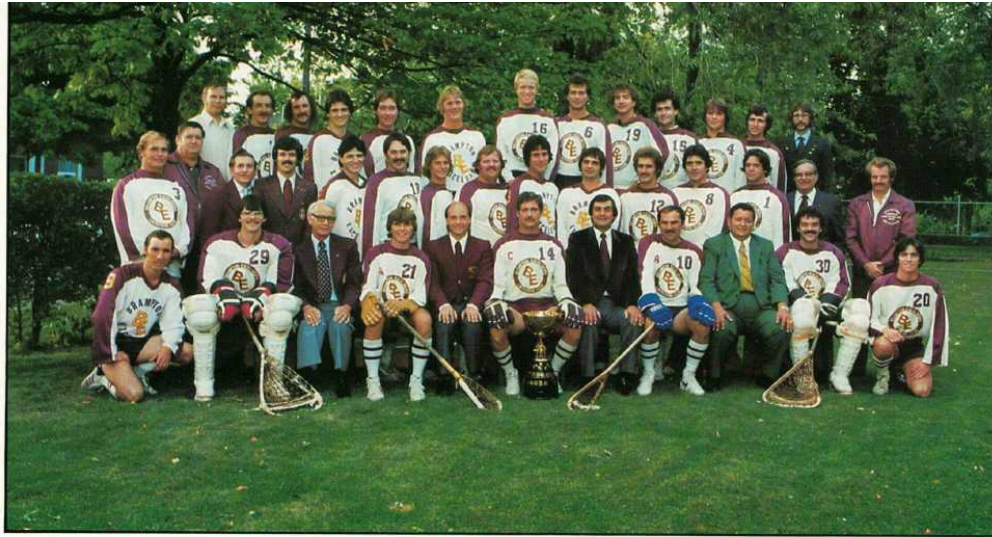
Brampton Jr. A Excelsior LC, Canadian Minto Cup Champions, 1958

Front row: J. Wilson, G. Lillie, J. Fitzpatrick, R. McClure, W. Thompson (Captain), L. Kendall, D. Beatty, J. McClure, K. Giles.
 Second row: W. G. Thompson (Coach), H. Armstrong, B. Ashbee, G. Thompson, B. Taylor, B. Wanless, R. Savage, J. Ford, J. Shropshire, Al McNair (President), B. Clure (Manager).
 Third row: P. Dalton, G. Evans, C. Armstrong, E. Fowler, L. Ewles, (Trainer), C. Sheppard, C. Armstrong, C. E. Patterson. —Gordon Campbell, Brampton

Expanding programs

Excelsior lacrosse during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s continued to flourish in Brampton. Brampton minor lacrosse continued to expand and become one of the largest youth lacrosse associations in Canada, offering recreational and representative box and field lacrosse programs for both boys and girls. Another outdoor box was built between Memorial Arena on Elliot St. and the Brampton Curling Club, replacing the Rosalea venue.

The Junior A Excels captured the provincial crown in 1962 and 1976 and the Excelsior Jr. B team, initiated in 1968, won its first provincial crown in 1980. The Excelsiors experienced their first Sr. B President's Cup Canadian championship in 1972, defeating the New Westminster Blues. Seven more Senior A provincial crowns (1961, 1962, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, and 1981) and Brampton's fourth Mann Cup in 1980 were brought home during this period. A number of Brampton players would go on to play in the newly established professional league.



BRAMPTON EXCELSIORS — 1980 MANN CUP CHAMPIONS

- Photograph by Gordon Campbell

*FRONT ROW: Bob Bolitho; Tim Barrie; Everett Coates (Gen. Mgr.); Bob Burke (Asst. Capt.); Steve Mastine (Asst. Coach); Tom Patrick (Capt.); John McCauley (Coach); Gord Keates (Asst. Capt.); Jim Nesbitt (Mgr.); Barry Maruk; Barry Trood
MIDDLE ROW: Chuck Williams; Bob Nesbitt (Trainer); Herb Phillips (Exec.); Dean McLeod (Exec.); Jim Wasson; Ken Archdekin; Mark Thompson; Bram Wilfong; Bruce Parkinson; Terry Sanderson; Jim Coates; Rick Hurst; Greg Crawford; Harry Cameron (President); Bob Sanderson (Trainer)
BACK ROW: Wayne Perrie; Garry Nicholson; Bill Bolitho; Bob Wasson; Bruce Todman; Gary Kalting; Mark Fisher; Bill Fox; Gord Lyons; Bary Richardson; Jim Lockhurst; Bob Wilson; Al Prechner (Trainer)*

A continuing pursuit of lacrosse excellence

Since the 1990s, lacrosse has continued to contribute to Brampton's sports legacy as revealed by a flourishing boys' and girls' minor box and field programs and very successful junior, major, and masters' teams. As the National Lacrosse League (NLL) established itself, Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association witnessed an upsurge in growth with over 1000 youth playing locally during the late 1990s. During this same period, Brampton minor lacrosse also experienced a significant upsurge in the number of girls involved in the sport.



Jim Veltman and BMLA Players, 1998

In these last few decades, Brampton has experienced the play of some of the world's best teams and greatest players and coaches. The Junior Excels again captured the provincial crown in 1994 and 2018 and were Canadian finalists in 2009. The Sr. (Majors) Excelsiors captured ten more provincial championships

(1992, 1993, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2009 & 2011) and seven more Canadian Mann Cup championships (1992, 1993, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2009 & 2011).



Brampton Sr. Excelsior LC, Canadian Mann Cup Champions, 2011

Central to the ongoing development of lacrosse in Brampton has been the significant contributions provided by dedicated individuals, families, businesses, and local citizens who make up the bedrock of the Brampton lacrosse community. Over 50 former 'home-grown' Excelsiors have found their way into the Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame, an outstanding accomplishment. George 'Potsy' Burrows, Brampton's oldest living Excelsior at 104, is the oldest living member of the prestigious Hall.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the development of lacrosse in Brampton has been straightforward throughout its 150+ years. Excelsior lacrosse, like most sports, has faced its own set of internal and external complications and challenges. Numerous reorganization plans, cancellation of play of different teams in certain years, tensions created between amateurism and professionalism, issues of local club and provincial association governance, financial support, and interruptions during the two world wars and the recent pandemic, for example, are evident throughout its history.

Most recently, for example, controversy has surrounded the (purported) sale of the Excelsior Majors' team with reverberations being felt across lacrosse circles, locally and provincially. Locally, questions have been raised about the legitimacy of the BELC Executive's decision to sell the team as well as the legality of the transaction itself. Issues related to the Majors' League governance of these developments, under the provincial umbrella of the Ontario Lacrosse Association, revealed additional signs of controversy and confusion. A new group, the Excelsior Lacrosse Legacy Association (ELLA), established itself to investigate these questions and advocate for the continuation of Excelsior Majors' lacrosse in Brampton. This group was subsequently elected by Excelsior alumni members in the fall of 2021 to replace the existing Executive and oversee Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club operations. During this same period, the OLA Board of

Directors voted to not recognize the sale of the Brampton Excelsiors' franchise. All sides are now working towards a resolution of this situation with the intent to see a return of the Brampton Excelsior Majors' Club in 2023.

Junior and Senior (Major Series) lacrosse was cancelled in Ontario in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID, with no provincial or national play/championships. This summer the Junior B and Junior A box teams would have had rosters of about 26 players each, although the senior team did not run in 2022. The recent controversy is in the process of being worked out as all sides are now working towards a resolution of this situation with the intent to see a return of the Brampton Excelsior Majors' Club in 2023. An active minor program of box and field continued.

Nonetheless, during this recent period of turmoil, the Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club and Brampton Minor Lacrosse Association continue to operate a variety of highly successful programs. In August 2022, the Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club hosted Canada's Junior A Minto Cup and Junior B Founders' Cup Box Lacrosse Championships. And still, the 'Excelsior' brand and its' meaning, 'more lofty, still higher, ever upwards' continues to underpin Brampton's persisting goal of lacrosse excellence.

Question from the editor?

Is the Brampton Excelsior lacrosse Club the longest continuously running lacrosse club in the world? Is it the most extant club (That is, the club that started the earliest and despite a few years where the club may have folded for various reasons, including war, is still playing today)?

While no one is certain about these claims it certainly one of the longest running clubs in Canada and the lacrosse world. Many other communities/towns in Ontario have long term lacrosse histories (e.g., Orangeville, Peterborough, St. Catharines). One difference being that Brampton has consistently held onto the name, Excelsior. Sadly the lack of records makes this difficult to substantiate or deny, but we do know that other than universities, most nations, and therefore lacrosse clubs and associations were impacted by world wars, Spanish flu and most recently COVID, but regardless what a wonderful and proud history the Excelsior's have.

Perhaps a team from Canada can make that claim or even a club from the north of England.

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August 25, 1882; Corporation of the County of Peel (1967). *A History of Peel County: To Mark Its Centenary as a Separate County, 1867-1967*. Brampton: Charters Publishing Co. Ltd.; Davidson, Donald, J. (1964). *Brampton: Then and Now*; Giles, K. (1973). Lacrosse Paramount for over 100 years. *Brampton's 100th Anniversary, 1873-1973*. Corporation of the /Town of Brampton and the Brampton Centennial Committee, p. 105-109; Giles, K. (1983) *Memories of lacrosse in Brampton*. The Brampton Excelsior Lacrosse Club Special Commemorative Issue; Lacrosse Match, *Brampton Times*, September 2, 1870; Mitchell, Kanentakeron Michael (Ed.) (2010). Teiotsikwaeks: Lacrosse, the Creator's game. Ronathahonni Cultural Centre: Akwesasne, Ont.; Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association (1931). Ontario Amateur Lacrosse Association 1931: Official Lacrosse Guide Containing Constitution and Rules; Ontario Lacrosse Association (2006). Champions & Award Winners of the Ontario Lacrosse Association, 1887-2006. Ontario Lacrosse Association; Power, Larry ('Wamper') (2011). *Bible of Lacrosse*, online at: <http://www.wampsbibleoflacrosse.com>; Sproule, G. Midget Lacrossists in Vigorous Contest. *The Conservator*, October 23, 1930; and Young Sharpers v. Young Excelsiors, *Brampton Conservator*, September 13, 1878. Assorted news clippings written by Brampton sports writers' Jimmy Burrell, 'Red' Plant, Jack Campbell, Ken 'Scoop' Giles, John McGhie, Al Best, and many more from 1868-present. A special thank you to Ken Wilde and to the archivists at the Peel Art Gallery, Museum, and Archives (PAMA) for their ongoing resource support.
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COMING SPRING 2023

In pursuit of excellence: A history of 'Excelsior' lacrosse in Brampton
Coming spring 2023, *In pursuit of excellence: A history of 'Excelsior' lacrosse in Brampton*. This book, written by Mark Evans, traces 150+ years of Excelsior lacrosse, exploring its origins, the growth of its varied programs, stories of prominent hometown players, teams, and builders within Brampton's shifting historical context. Photos, news clippings, historical documents, and interviews are provided. Details to follow through social media in the upcoming months.