

Review Essay: *The Grads are Playing Tonight!: The Story of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates Basketball Club*

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Book Under Review

M. Ann Hall. *The Grads are Playing Tonight!: The Story of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates Basketball Club*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2011. 352 pp.

With *The Grads are Playing Tonight*, M. Ann Hall, Canada's foremost historian of women in sport, turns her attention to one of Canada's greatest athletic success stories—the Edmonton Commercial Graduates women's basketball team. In ten briskly-paced chapters, Hall covers the story of the Grads from their formation in 1915, through their dominant world championship days of the 1920s when they won over 95 percent of the 500 plus games they played, until they disbanded in 1940. Although this is a well-researched and well-written study of one of Canada's most successful sports teams, it is one that is best targeted for casual readers and sports fans.

The Edmonton Grads team was originally formed in 1915 as the women's basketball team at McDougall Commercial High. Extremely successful in Alberta's high school competitions, the team stayed together following their graduation from McDougall, riding a wave of popularity for women's basketball to contest tournaments further afield throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Over the course of their existence, the team won four consecutive Olympic tournaments (although never a medal as women's basketball was not a medal sport). Moreover, in 1923, the team won the Underwood Trophy—the most prestigious challenge trophy in women's basketball—which they held until 1940, only relinquishing it when their team disbanded. For over two decades, the Edmonton Grads were perhaps the most dominant sports team on the planet.

Over the course of her study, Hall introduces her readers to a number of personalities who played for the Grads team. Indeed, three whole chapters are devoted to a fascinating series of mini-biographies of the players, spanning the team's early, middle, and later years. In so doing, it is clear that Hall is trying to reveal who the players were beyond their roles on the team. Hall relies on both published material and, in some cases, interviews with surviving relatives in her historical reconnaissance. Despite sincere efforts at detailing the young women who were the Edmonton Grads, it is

somewhat disappointing that the figure who emerges most fully-formed in this history is not one of the many female players over the 25 year of the team's history, but their male coach, J. Percy Page.

Hall clearly reveals Page's impact on the Grads team and its players. Not only did he schedule the Grads in various tournaments, arrange for travel, and teach the team smart strategy, but he also had a role in shaping the image the team projected by mandating that the players adhere to strict gender ideals. As Hall describes it, "Page insisted that his players be ladies first and basketball players second, and he kept a tight rein on their behavior both on and off the court." The players were not to smoke, drink, chew gum, or fraternize with young men, restrictions Hall contends the players gladly embraced not only because such behavior was seen as counter to "the ultimate pinnacle of womanhood," but also because as young women it was expected that they would soon marry and abandon their athletic careers in order to become wives, mothers, and homemakers.

While Hall's emphasis on Page may be expected—after all, he was one of the few constants over the 25-year history of the team—it nevertheless contributes to one of the books most serious flaws. That a history of a women's basketball team focuses more on the man who controlled the purse-strings and the schedule of the team than the female players themselves, without providing any real engagement with gendered hierarchy of the sporting administration that oversaw the Grads program and the sporting world at large is a lost opportunity. As a result, Hall studies a celebrated woman's basketball team without critically examining the expectation that the only role women were to fill for the Grads was to be players—team management positions were universally filled by men. To be fair, organizational positions for a number of women's sporting teams at the time were most often filled by men. Moreover, Hall does a fine job of relaying how the Grads often challenged gendered expectations for them on the court—for example, she relays a story of how after practicing against a boys high school squad, "to sharpen their knowledge of the men's game," they "ditched their respective bloomers and were outfitted in short-sleeved tops and knee-length shorts, with socks and kneepads covering their legs" (p. 39) in an effort attempt to allow for greater freedom of movement. It was through actions such as this, Hall claims, that the team was able to "fashion a

new model of athletic womanhood, characterized by the masculine qualities of skill, strength, speed, agility, and energy, while at the same time retaining their femininity. Their very presence helped to redefine the earlier contested notions of womanhood." (p. 24) Unfortunately, in Hall's telling, this redefinition of womanhood stopped once the game was over and the players had left the court. It would have been interesting to explore how and if the Grads' on-court challenge to athletic gender roles translated to their off-court lives.

Despite the flaw mentioned above, this is an engaging study of an often ignored part of Canada's sporting past. It provides an excellent overview of the Grads' formation, of their championship years during the 1920s and 1930s, and of their disbanding in 1940. Indeed, the two appendices Hall provides on the Grads' chronology and their many awards and honours provide a useful overview of the team's impact on the world of women's basketball. Unfortunately, it is often heavy on description and light on analysis. Sports history has in recent years been on the frontline of gendered analyses of such concepts as womanhood and the body. While Hall hints at some of the ways the Grads challenged depression-era notions of feminine athleticism, in the end the reader is left wanting more. This failure to fully present a gendered analysis of the Grads both on and off the court means that *The Grads are Playing Tonight* is best suited for casual readers and basketball fans, or perhaps an undergraduate class in sport—and not gender—history.