

THE MASTER SPORTSMAN

It was long past the midnight hour, and the master sportsman could be seen actively engaged in conversation with a Cobourg friend, while his wife, Grace, was nearby to replenish the cold tea in a grandfather mug at his side on the coffee table.

A habit born of former occupation remained with Harvey Sproule, George Street, Cobourg. He seldom went to bed before dawn. While with the Toronto Daily Star as a sports scribe, he had worked the midnight shift; the graveyard shift it was normally called, and those with that working experience will be familiar with the Sproule habit.

Harvey and I were friends. He was the raconteur and I was the listener.

Not only did Harvey "talk a good game", he was a superlative player. His main prowess was in the game of curling; but he majored as well as a horse-racing adjudicator in the early days of radio in Canada and the United States, where he performed on the Churchill Downs in Kentucky and the Woodbine in Toronto; and later after participating in hockey, he called the shots as a referee in Canada's national pastime.

Harvey lived and loved sport. At the turn of the 1960s the Master Sportsman died, aged 74. True to his word, he survived to receive the government old age pension. He

always said he'd live to beat the government out of some money for what had been taken from him in tax during his high-salaried years.

In the heydays of the 1940s and 1950s, Harvey seemed to the uninitiated to be what he wasn't: An American tourist overstaying his visit, driving an American automobile with an American licence.

But Harvey was no southern cousin. He lived with his wife, Grace, one of the native Macklins, on George Street. He was thoroughly Canadian. The American licence was no "flag" used in affront to Old Cobourg in its sensitive United-Empire-Loyalist upbringing; no, there was a valid reason for the licence plate. Harvey in his sporting sorties to the United States acquired real estate property. The car and the plate from south of the undefended border exemplified the Sproule economic outlook, in saving dollars from an iniquitous impost tax.

Harvey played the tax game with the same enthusiasm he applied to sport. In all his nomad career before settling in Cobourg, Harvey's voice on radio was a commanding presence. It sounded almost everywhere.

As a curler, Harvey was virtually without equal. He could call the shot on the button in the centre of the ring and play the shot perfectly.

Harvey loved to reminisce.

One late evening at his George Street residence, Harvey related a tale about Maurice Booth, who was Mayor

of Cobourg during the 1937 centennial year. Maurice was an ardent bowler on Cobourg greens and an accomplished performer in the roarin' game of curling.

While Cobourg could only boast of a modest rink on Queen Street where Lakeshore Electric is now located, in those burgeoning days the product of curling prowess far outshone the limitations of playing on two sheets of ice. The Mayor of Cobourg was graduated cum laude.

One winter there was a bonspiel at the holiest of holies, the Granite Club of Toronto. For the invitation affair, Mr. Booth as skip chose his vice-skip, second stone and first stone players, Cobourg's finest.

Harvey was left with a scrub choice of so-so players. He and his men joined the assembly at the Granite Club, to face in contest the best curlers in Ontario.

In recalling the affair, Harvey was gleeful:

"Do you remember that old commercial about learning how to play the piano in so many, short, easy lessons? And the advertising blurb, 'they all laughed when I sat down to play'?"

"Well, Booth and his teammates laughed when they saw me and my scrub three on the ice."

Harvey helped himself to another cup of cold tea.

"The look in Mr. Booth's eyes was sardonic to say the least. But when it was all over that look changed to down and out envy, when we won top honors at the bonspiel and brought home the bacon !"

In those Cobourg days drawing to a close, Harvey seemed to be a bit of a bore with his loquacious ways, but he was a great exception to the rule. He "talked a good game" but

defied criticism by playing a masterly game.

But let us now take leave of Harvey, the sportsman, and turn to other affairs of Cobourg. Consider the pastime of bridge, a more passive game but with the embellishment of local gossip, rich and juicy, too good to keep behind a hand of cards.

One of the habitués of bridge was inspired to write a newspaper column. His efforts appeared in print under the alias of Jimmy Hansard, a coined cognomen borrowed from the published debates in the House of Commons, Ottawa.

The Parliament of Cobourg, of course, was the Senate Bench, duly occupied, weather permitting, in front of Victoria Hall, the famous edifice once graced over one century ago by the gracious presence of the Prince of Wales.

Jimmy Hansard made notes of the chatter at bridge, on the street corner, inside the historical hall, the council chambers and other meeting places. Fortified by copious comments and goings on, Jimmy put words of such wisdom in the mouths of Senator Proudfoot and his colleagues so righteously seated in state.

In the pseudonym of Jimmy Hansard and his facile pen, rapier, rollicking, detonating thrusts were made in the town newspaper.

Who is Jimmy Hansard? . . . the question ran helter, skelter all over Cobourg.

Who was Jimmy Hansard?

Harvey Sproule is gone and Jimmy Hansard has passed on to his reward . . .

Harvey (Jimmy Hansard) Sproule ! ! !



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Sources of Information:

Grace Macklin, now deceased

Maurice Booth, Mayor, 1937, now deceased

C. E. Ralls, merchant, now deceased

Jimmy Hansard (1948); pseudonym

Cobourg Curling Rink, Queen Street, former site

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