THE GRADS ARE PLAYING

M. ANN HALL

TONIGHT!

The Story of the Edmonton Commercial Graduates Basketball Club
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M. ANN HALL
Tribute to the “Grads”

They brought their city more than fame,
They brought their nation more than pride;
The strongest foe, the toughest game
Were things they simply took in stride.
For first they faced the inward jars—
The jealousy, the selfish dreams;
Those things which make outstanding stars
But wreck consistent, winning teams.
The pass that meant another’s score,
The faith that fed another’s drive
Were constant, on and off the floor,
For every year of twenty-five.

—FREDERICK B. WATT
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TODAY IT SEEMS UTTERLY INCOMPRESSIBLE to several generations of Canadian sports fans, but once upon a time, a long time ago, there was an Edmonton team that could claim greatness to equal the almost mythical glory gangs of Oilers and Eskimos. Greatness to match that of Wayne Gretzky and the group coached by Glen Sather, including Hockey Hall of Famers Mark Messier, Jari Kurri, Grant Fuhr, Paul Coffey, and Glenn Anderson, who won five Stanley Cups over a span of seven seasons? Success to compare to the five-in-a-row Grey Cup champion Eskimos coached by Hugh Campbell, featuring the likes of Warren Moon, Tom Wilkinson, Dan Kepley, Dave Fennell, Brian Kelly, and Dave Cutler? Could such a team have existed?

Before this sports columnist would go on to cover those great Eskimos and Oilers teams, it seemed like pure fiction to listen to the tales of Jack Deakin, my old Edmonton Journal sports editor, over drinks, invariably at 4 A.M., about J. Percy Page and the Edmonton Grads. Deakin colourfully told about a team that in its time brought glory to Edmonton on a scale that would not be outdone by Jackie Parker, Normie Kwong, Johnny Bright, and
Rollie Miles and the three-in-a-row Grey Cup Eskimos of 1954–55–56. In the wee hours of many a morning after the paper was put to bed, Deakin related tales of the first team to own the town that became known as the City of Champions, the first team to put Edmonton on the map in sports, and not just nationally but internationally. A basketball team. A girls’ basketball team!

Deakin explained that the Edmonton Grads were a team of graduates of McDougall Commercial High School coached by J. Percy Page, who may be familiar to readers now as the former Lieutenant Governor of the province of Alberta. The Edmonton Grads drew capacity crowds of more than 6,000 people, 10 per cent of the population when Edmonton was little more than a pimple on the prairie. The Grads even outdrew hockey teams of the time. Deakin told of how the Grads took three tours to Europe and won what were effectively demonstration sport versions of the Olympics in Paris in 1924, Amsterdam in 1928, and Berlin in 1936. He spoke of how they played 522 games and won 502. And he spun stories of how a third of the population welcomed them home on return from some of their many conquests. He told the young scribes on his staff how James A. Naismith, the inventor of basketball, declared the Grads to be, in many ways, the greatest team ever to play the game he had invented. One night, Deakin produced a report from the newspaper morgue in which Naismith called the team “the finest basketball team that ever stepped out on a floor.”

As it happened, sports editor Deakin assigned me to cover a reunion of the team, which gave me the opportunity to meet many of the Grads and J. Percy Page. All those years later, the women spoke of Page with a reverence I’ve heard few players have for a former coach, no matter the success involved. They explained how he coached them not just to be the glory of their times playing international basketball, but also in life, by coaching them how to represent themselves and their city, at all times as ladies first.
Covering the Oilers in the World Hockey Association one year as a young sportswriter, I found myself in Springfield, Massachusetts, the town where hockey legend Eddie Shore, a.k.a. the Edmonton Express, who married Edmonton Grad star Kate Macrae, ran his minor league Springfield Indians. It’s in Springfield where Canadian Naismith invented the game of basketball, and where the Basketball Hall of Fame and Museum are located. On display at the time was the uniform of Noel MacDonald, the greatest of the Grads, but recognition for the team was token and infuriating if you knew their story. In a recent visit, there was no evidence whatsoever of their existence in a new Hall of Fame building in Springfield. In Toronto, the massive Underwood International Trophy, bigger than the Stanley Cup, sat at a display in Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame, but it ended up in boxes when the place was closed in recent years. Hopefully visitors to Canada’s fabulous new Sports Hall of Fame in Calgary are able to see this trophy.

One by one the members of the team died, many without notice. It was as if the Edmonton Grads had faded into history, forgotten by time. Then one day in 2010 I was invited to the 100th birthday party for Grad Edith Stone Sutton. And it all became real for me again with the spunky old gal who proclaimed it great to be alive and an Edmonton Grad. She used the occasion to declare herself the “last living member of the Edmonton Grads,” despite the fact her twin sister and teammate Helen Stone Stewart was still alive in Vancouver and teammate Kay MacRitchie MacBeth was living in Comox. Edith was, however, the last Grad still living in Edmonton. “Look at me. I’m the last one. All by myself,” she said. Then she paused for a moment. “It’s lonely at the top,” she laughed. This was a happy occasion. Posing for a picture with me, she hooted, “Imagine, at my age, being interviewed by a sportswriter!”

There were greater honours at the open house birthday party held at Queen Alexandra Community Hall on University Avenue,
a block from the house where Edith still lives a “fiercely independent” life, as she always has according to her grandson Michael Sutton. MP Linda Duncan presented her with a plaque proclaiming the day a “national historic occasion.” There were also proclama-
tions from Queen Elizabeth, the Governor General, the Lieutenant Governor, Prime Minister, Premier, and several other officials, including Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel, who held up a 1932 team picture of her and said, “You were a good looking broad back then and a better looking broad now. You’re an angel.” There were birthday cakes in the forms of a basketball, a court, and a basketball shoe. The walls were decorated with pictures of the team. And there was the National Film Board movie about the team that James Naismith called “the finest basketball team that ever stepped out on a floor.”

The gal who played on the team from 1930 through 1934 said the best part of her 100th birthday was being able to have an occasion to keep the memory of the Grads alive. “People today haven’t heard of the Edmonton Grads. It was a long time ago. And for a lot of it, you had to be there,” she said, speaking of filling buildings for women’s basketball games and being the toast of the town. “I remember Toronto. Oh, my, they were jealous of Edmonton. I can’t possibly explain the way it was then. You don’t know unless you were there. It was a special team and a special time. It will never happen again. It’s amazing it happened then.”

Now this book comes along to take you there. Remarkably, what you are about to read is the first ever book written about this team. To me, this wonderful work by author M. Ann Hall is like opening a time capsule. What makes this book exceptional, I think, is the scholarly research approach, which was required at this time if for no other reason than to make this now so difficult-to-believe story believable. At the same time, you will discover that the meticulous documentation takes little away from the terrific tales described by
my old sports editor Jack Deakin with what seemed to me to be
great hyperbole.

Thank you, Ann Hall, for The Grads Are Playing Tonight! It's game
time...

TERRY JONES
Edmonton Sun Sports Columnist
January 2011
## Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ASHFM</td>
<td>Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum</td>
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<td>CEA</td>
<td>City of Edmonton Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSHF</td>
<td>Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame</td>
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<td>GA</td>
<td>Glenbow Archives</td>
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<td>LAC</td>
<td>Library and Archives Canada</td>
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<td>PAA</td>
<td>Provincial Archives of Alberta</td>
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<td>SCA</td>
<td>Smith College Archives</td>
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<td>UAL</td>
<td>University of Alberta Libraries</td>
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Acknowledgements

Historical projects like this one could not be completed without the assistance of skilled reference librarians and archivists, and I have benefitted from the enthusiasm and patience of many, especially in locating long hidden documents, artifacts, and images. In particular, I wish to thank Paula Aurini-Onderwater and Sharon Bell at the City of Edmonton Archives; Sandy Williams and Tanya Read at the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame and Museum; Susan Kooyman at the Glenbow Archives; Heather Kerr at the Edmonton Artifact Centre; and Robert Cole in Peel’s Prairie Provinces, University of Alberta Libraries. Many others, unfortunately anonymous, assisted me at the Provincial Archives of Alberta and in the Rutherford Library at the University of Alberta.

By the time I began my research, most of the Edmonton Grads had passed away or were too elderly to be interviewed. Fortunately, I was able to interview Helen Northup Alexander and Betty Bawden Bowen before they died. I was also able to interview Kay MacRitchie MacBeth and Edith Stone Sutton several times, both of whom are still alive as this book goes to press. Others interviewed include Patricia Page Hollingsworth, J. Percy Page’s daughter, and June Causgrove Cox, a former Grad Cub. I am also very grateful to the
following relatives of the Grads, who took the time to answer my many questions: Diane Anderson, Alex Cromarty, Kay Deedrick, Myrt Ferrier, Penny Gartner, Don Hollingsworth, Verna Mcllveen, Ronnie Mills, Edward (Ted) W. Shore, Jr., Judith Silvertsen, Jennifer Spriddle, Logan Tait, and Jane Webb.

Working with the University of Alberta Press has been a pleasure, and especially with the fine team of individuals who worked on this project: Alan Brownoff, Linda Cameron, Cathie Crooks, Peter Midgley, and Mary Lou Roy. Special thanks to Joanne Muzak for improving my prose and pointing out inconsistencies. The reader has certainly benefitted from all your hard work.

Finally, three people deserve a special mention. David Dorward, the driving force behind Edmonton’s new GO Community Centre, has been a keen supporter of this project from its early beginnings. His generosity allowed me to acquire the very best images to illustrate this book. Nancy Mitchell, my sister, used her superb genealogical research skills to find important details about the lives of several Grads. Jane Haslett, my partner, not only endured this project longer than anyone else, she also listened patiently to my endless stories and commented upon the many drafts.
Introduction

The Grads Are Playing Tonight! For twenty-five years, from 1915 to 1940, this refrain brought thousands of excited fans out to watch the Edmonton Commercial Graduates play basketball. Almost all members of the team were graduates of McDougall Commercial High School, and from the time they entered the school as young students, they came under the tutelage of J. Percy Page, their teacher, coach, and mentor. They played over 400 official games, losing only twenty for a winning average of 95 per cent. They travelled more than 125,000 miles in Canada, the United States, and Europe. They crossed the Atlantic three times to defend their world title at exhibition games held in conjunction with the Summer Olympics in Paris, Amsterdam, and Berlin. They disbanded in 1940, long before women’s basketball became an Olympic sport.

Only seven teams ever scored 50 or more points against the Grads in a single game, whereas the Grads turned the 50-point corner in no less than 162 games. Their highest score was 136 in an official game against the University of Alberta in 1934. They held the Underwood International Trophy (USA versus Canada) for seventeen years, and it was presented to them permanently on their twenty-fifth anniversary. They won their games on outdoor and indoor courts of all sizes,
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