


A CENTURY OF

Sport

IN THE
Finnish
Community of
Thunder Bay



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2013



NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO SPORTS HALL OF FAME

and the

THUNDER BAY FINNISH CANADIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Century of Sport in the Finnish Community of Thunder Bay

Co-published by:

Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame

and the

Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society



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Front Cover

Fort William Karhu Athletic Club members performing a pyramid circa 1910.
TBFCHS MG8,D,3,28,H,I252

Back Cover

Members of Reipas cheerleading squad at the 1963 Finnish Festival included (l-r) Miriam Huovinen,
Kaarina Parkkinen, Tuula Kinanen, Terttu Parkinen, Helena Wickstrom and Audrey Tiainen.
NWOSHF Archives.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the athletes, volunteers, coaches and builders who make up the rich and
proud history of sport within the Finnish Community of Thunder Bay, and to the people who had the
dream of one day documenting that history in a publication.

To all the people who, since the 1970s, have conducted interviews, collected and edited photographs
and written and edited documents, thank you for making the dream a reality.

Laura
Nigro

Dave Nicholson

ALL THE BEST
Diane Imrie

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Port Arthur Jyry Athletic Club. TBFCHS MG8,D,2,27,H,I,248a

Foreword

Work on this book began in the summer of 2009, but its inspiration came from the groundwork laid by a small group from the *Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society* over thirty-five years ago. It was spearheaded by the vivacious Cairine Budner; a woman whose work is very much the beacon and the backbone of this enterprise.

It was the dream of Cairine and the Society to compile the history of Finnish sporting activity and athletic organizations in the Thunder Bay area from its beginnings in the early 20th century. The histories of the athletic clubs and individuals which are contained in this book are based, in substantial part, upon a series of interviews with local Finns involved in sports that were conducted by Cairine and members of the Society in the late 1970s. They were recorded on cassette tapes and transcribed into short biographies by Pentti Lund and remained tucked away in a suitcase for many decades.

The *Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society* joined forces with the *Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame* in 2009, and with the support of the Government of Ontario through the *Summer Experience Program*, the process of transferring the original tapes into a digital format and conducting additional research was undertaken.

With the financial assistance of the *Ministry of Culture* and the *Cultural Strategic Investment Fund (CSIF)*, and the research and writing efforts of Laura Nigro, David Nicholson and Diane Imrie, the long held dream of creating a permanent record of the rich history of Thunder Bay's Finnish Canadian sports organizations, athletes and builders has finally been realized through this publication.

Thanks to the individuals that helped bring this dream to life, including: Cairine Budner, Kathy Crewdson, Kathryn Dwyer, Diane Imrie, Brent Kelso, Marc Metsaranta, Jeremy Mohr, David Nicholson, Laura Nigro and Peter Raffo.

Editors Note: Every effort has been made to compile as complete a history on athletic organizations and individuals as possible. Any omission of information or individuals is completely unintentional. The omission of umlauts on some of the names included in this publication was a decision of the editorial committee given that the majority of individuals mentioned in this book do not, themselves, use them. Maiden names, when available, appear in brackets.



**THUNDER BAY
FINNISH CANADIAN
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Profile: Cairine Budner *By David Nicholson*



Cairine Budner in her garden in the summer of 2011. Photo courtesy of Kathy Crewdson.

In the warm and cozy rec room in her home in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Cairine Budner is welcoming and vibrant, with the energy of somebody much younger than her 81 years. I asked Cairine what inspired the idea to document the local Finnish sports history.

“I was with the *Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society* and we were putting together a sports history for our collection. There were university students and adults that were willing to do an interview or two with people that they knew. So we gathered some of the information for the sports material about the early boxers, the wrestlers, the skiers. This is what we were doing, just to get their memories, bringing all this to the front and put it into some kind of preservation medium. It was just so important. I felt very strongly that sports have always been part of the Finnish community. Even as a youngster, when my parents went to the Finn Hall, there were activities going on.”

Born Cairine Beck, she grew up in Port Arthur, Ontario (now Thunder Bay), within a few blocks of the Finnish Labour Temple on Bay Street (the “Big Finn Hall”), and became involved with the *Finnish Athletic Club Nahjus*. The club had gymnastic activities in the winter and track and field in the summer. “So all of these teenagers, as we were at the time, we enjoyed participating with each other, and not necessarily against each other. It was a really, really active community. So it didn’t matter if you were bringing your friends along, they were always welcome. A lot of kids had friends that were of Ukrainian or Italian background, but they wanted to come and participate.” It was her involvement with *Nahjus* that inspired her future goals. “I was more interested in learning how to coach. I wasn’t one of these very agile youngsters that was flying from the rings and things like that. To me, the coaching end was very, very intriguing because you had to learn how to “spot” and learn how to do certain moves for every type of mat work, on the parallel bars, on the [pommel] horse, all these things. So this was what intrigued me, you had to do certain things a certain way so that you wouldn’t get hurt.”

Even after her marriage and with three small children in tow, she continued to promote and teach gymnastic skills in the 1950s and 1960s at community centres and local schools. “The Ontario Gymnastics Federation (OGF) approached me and asked if I would like to be the OGF representative for our area. They invited me down to Toronto



Cairine Budner with her 1973 Appreciation Award from the Ontario Gymnastics Federation. TBFCHS Archives.

and I took a seminar there about coaching and judging methods. That way, I could bring students down there to compete, as an affiliate with them. That's when I actually started Thunder Bay Gymnastics, and Thunder Bay Gymnastics is still carrying on, I'm so pleased. As the gymnasts progressed they became coaches, to coach back into the club. That's all you can hope for, is that they enjoy the sport as much as you did, to pass it back on to the younger ones coming up."

Did the *Nahjus* club encourage the younger children too? "Yes, exactly the same, you encourage the young ones to do it because it's great fun, not because you have to. You can enjoy it, you can participate with your friends, help each other with the stunts that you do."

She was not the only former *Nahjus* member to teach and promote gymnastics and physical fitness. "Some of my friends from *Nahjus* went into Phys-Ed, teaching in different places. A very dear friend is in Minneapolis and she was a Phys-Ed teacher there. We had a *Nahjus* reunion this past year [2010]. It was nice, we must have had at least 30 get together, chat with each other, have pictures taken. It was a lovely, lovely get together. Some have gone, some have passed away, but the memories were carrying on with these reminiscences we were having."

Cairine knew, and most likely trained, many of the Finnish-Canadian athletes included in this book, so did she think there was a unique characteristic among them? "In every area that they [Finns] have lived in, they have enjoyed participation, whether they're skiers, swimmers, gymnasts or hockey players. A lot of these people had tremendous skills, whether they were from Finland, or from Canada, but they had the determination to do the best they could. I think it's instilled in you from a youngster, 'You can do it! C'mon, one more time, let's get this going here!' I think it's a determination to do the best that you can with the skill you've got. I think that's the key."

Thank you, Cairine, for all of your years of dedicated service with the Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society and for keeping the audio cassettes all those years.



Cairine Budner (on left) and the 1950 Nahjus Married Women's Gym Group preparing for a wand drill at Nahjus Park. TBFCHS PHIII-0012c

Chapter I: Introduction *By Laura Nigro*

Since their initial arrival in the late 1890s as permanent settlers, Finnish immigrants have contributed in various ways to the growth and development of Thunder Bay (previously known as the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William) and the surrounding area.¹ In particular, Finns have been instrumental in lending their strength to the labour sectors which included the mines, railway, bush camps, and the dockyards.² The immigrants also added to the cultural landscape with cuisine that included Karelian pie *Karjalan piiraka* and *pulla*, theatrical and musical displays that filled the local halls, and, of course, the sauna. But, an area often overlooked is the Finnish contribution to amateur sports and athletics. For over a century, Finnish communities in the area provided organized sporting events and clubs which fostered their innate love of athletics; a love that was an integral part of Finnish lifestyle and culture that made its way to Canada during the numerous waves of immigration and manifested itself through political and social organizations.



Early pioneer family. TBFCHS MG8,D,1,2,F,128a

Like many of the immigrants that came to North America over the years, Finns in Canada were faced with countless challenges and obstacles.³ Even though the working and living conditions were often unbearable, they continually prevailed.⁴ The Finns drew upon their culture and traditions not only to survive but thrive in their new surroundings. They achieved the seemingly

impossible task of embracing their new homeland with all of its hardships while still maintaining and preserving their Finnish heritage. When asked how they were able to manage such a feat, their reply is often one word: *sisu*. Though it lacks a sufficient English equivalent, the word *sisu* roughly translates to the Finns' ability to outlast, outperform, and exert themselves beyond ordinary human limitation.⁵ Their immigration to Canada was no exception.

Immigration by Finns to Thunder Bay and the surrounding area began during the late nineteenth century. It was spurred by both a national and regional belief that, as an editorial in the *Port Arthur Daily News* argued, "the assets of Canada are stupendous, the country reeks with underdeveloped riches, agricultural soils, minerals, water power, navigable lakes and rivers, a healthy invigorating climate, in fact, everything that makes a country great, waiting only for capital and energy of a man to develop it."⁶ Although the first documented Finnish immigrants arrived to Thunder Bay in 1876, it was not until the 1880s that the first substantial wave of Finnish immigration occurred. Shortly thereafter, the Thunder Bay area began to experience its first great wave of Finnish immigration.