

Soldiers past and present underscore ties between the military and sport at exhibition opening



By Brock Weir

At the end of the day, when it comes to sport, there are winners and losers ? but what you learn from your losses can be more valuable than anything else.

This was the message brought to the Aurora Museum & Archives on Thursday night as they celebrated the opening of Play Hard, Fight Hard: Sport and the Canadian Military, a travelling exhibition now on at the Aurora Museum & Archives until January 23 before it moves to its next stop in Manitoba.

Play Hard, Fight Hard brings together over 300 artefacts from several military museums across the country, as well as the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, to illustrate the links between various branches of the Canadian military and sports as popular as football to the more obscure broomaloo, a form of broomball which is the official regimental sport of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Joining members of the Aurora Museum & Archives Team, staff from the Town of Aurora, and Board members of the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame for the opening were three members of the Queen's York Rangers.

?When I was asked [to speak] I hadn't consciously registered the connection between the Armed Forces and sports,? said Corporal Michael Johnston, who was joined at the exhibition by Trooper Danial Kwon and Corporal Jake Lappall. ?Sport has been a very positive influence. We are very competitive and we like to win. Having said that, in most sports, you have a winning team and a losing team. You learn more from the losses than you do from the wins, that much is true, but today, when we play sports against each other we all come out on top because it builds camaraderie, it keeps us all physically active, and we push ourselves to our limits and beyond.?

It is also invaluable for when a soldier has to face some significant uphill battles, he added.

?It helps when people are combat casualties or disabled in some way. Sports is a very good way to build back the soldier in the person, man or woman.?

Although the exhibition itself is curated to portray the national experience, local connections were driven home further at the opening itself by Bill Fleury, who spoke about his grandfather, William James Fleury, a member of the prominent family behind the Fleury Implement Works.

As a Canadian soldier, as well as a member of the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame for his pioneering work on the cricket pitch, William James Fleury was held up as a close-to-home example of the interplay between sports and military.

?For Will as a young man, the mid-1880s were a heady time,? said grandson about grandfather. ?Fight Hard, Play Hard might be the better way to describe his personal experience at the time. In 1885, Will turned 20 years old, not yet the age of majority of 21. It was a tumultuous time in the Canadian Northwest and as a 1st Lieutenant in the York Rangers since the previous year, he joined the Canadian Army campaign to oppose what came to be known as the Riel Rebellion.

?His experience of the campaign was more adventure than combat ? from my perspective, a good thing! If we usually think of sports as a good preparation for becoming a soldier, it seems from Will's experience that his short but intensive military service in the

spring of 1885 helped his athletic skills. No doubt he improved his judgement and discipline and learned the importance of teamwork. He also developed a tough constitution to overcome the constant diet ofhardtack, canned beef, pork and tea. With all that marching, and helped by bottles of brandy and lime juice he constantly requested from home, Will obviously came back in splendid physical condition, with his face burned and tanned by the sun.

?Before going to the Northwest, Will had made a reputation for himself as a cricketer, playing at various high schools, then at the University of Toronto, the Toronto Cricket Club and various local teams around Toronto. In 1887, at age 22, he was the last and second-youngest player chosen for a team to represent Canada on a tour of England. The Toronto World described him as ?a good medium pace bowler, as good a fielder as there is in the team, and a hard-hitting batter.' Will's cricket career continued to prosper. In July 1888, the Toronto Mail recorded the high-batting scores he had made in four matches during the previous week playing for Ontario against Quebec, and Toronto against Rosedale, Ottawa and Peterborough. The Aurora Banner pronounced, ?Mr. W.J. Fleury still continues to make large scores in cricket and bids fair to become the champion of Canada.'?

Fleury continued to play cricket for many years, managing the Toronto Zingari team in 1910, which toured England, an accolade recognized last year by the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.