

THE EMERGENCE OF BOX LACROSSE IN AUSTRALIA

CHAPTER ONE – 1978

It must be remembered that the length and severity of the Canadian winter did not encourage open-air sport. Box lacrosse, albeit a summer sport, being played indoors and under artificial lights was an excellent solution to their problem. From 1931 until 1967 Canada hardly played any field lacrosse. Box lacrosse was a six-a-side game, very fast, and requiring great skill and stick work. Canadian players were reluctant to revive the field game when the box game suited their purposes so well.

So the question was asked in Canada “Why is Canada getting the field game going again?” According to CLA President, Doug Budden, “Field lacrosse will be one of the sports of the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton in 1978. Naturally, as host country, we want to field a competitive team.”

But in fact it was box lacrosse that was the demonstration sport at Edmonton in 1978 because lacrosse was Canada’s national sport, and field lacrosse was hardly played.

The Canadians did not know that a box-lacrosse association had been formed in Victoria three years earlier, and was now beginning to gather momentum in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.

Given the professionalism and elements of violence in box similar to ice hockey it is small wonder that amateur lacrosse players view with some repugnance many aspects of box lacrosse. While this is true what was different at that time between lacrosse in Australia and North America was that Australians didn’t require or perhaps couldn’t generally afford the type of protective equipment that was essential and commonplace in box lacrosse and field lacrosse in the U.S. It must be remembered that the 1962 and 1967 Australian teams that toured North America were staggered by the checking allowed and the lack of enforcement of rules to protect players, whether it be box or field lacrosse.

But the skills required in box lacrosse are undeniable, the game is a lot faster, more precise stick work and shooting is required in a confined area that requires shots to be taken within a short period of time. Pick and roll techniques and screening are far superior in box than in field lacrosse.

Moving to the challenges of organizing a box lacrosse tour of Canada in 1978, to playing its final games under the Commonwealth Games umbrella in Edmonton, the Australian Lacrosse Council (ALC) in 1977 undertook to arrange and underpin the finance of the tour. Why England wasn’t involved as the other Commonwealth nation we do not know. The tour was confirmed in November 1977 and the coach and manager appointed shortly thereafter.

It was decided that players eligible to be selected for the Australian team should have played box lacrosse in 1977. This virtually restricted the team to Victorians, but South Australia and Western Australia were becoming seriously interested in the game and a proposition was laid before ALC that at least 2 players should be selected from each state.

The probable departure date for the tour would be 31 July, for a tour lasting 2 or 3 weeks. ALC could offer some assistance with accommodation, but the estimated contribution would be \$1,000 - \$1,200. The team was to consist of 15 players, a

coach and a manager. The appearance at the Commonwealth Games would be from 11 August 1978. Warm up games would be played in Vancouver, and probably 1 at Edmonton before the exhibition. Another game might be played in Los Angeles, if free accommodation was available.

As part of the promotion of the tour Tom Pryor and Lou Richards of football fame collaborated to write an article on box lacrosse in "The Sun" (10 June 1978) "You don't have to be crazy to play box lacrosse, but it helps. I've seen some tough games in my time, but this one frightens me just to remember" said Lou Richards, former AFL legend.

"Basically, box lacrosse is field lacrosse played under ice-hockey rules, except its not on ice! It's simple, really: You're not allowed to clobber an opponent with your stick unless the ball is somewhere in the court. And you can't push him into the wall unless he's in reach. The Canadians like it however, and it will be played at the Commonwealth Games later this year.

Eighteen players, including fifteen suicidal Victorians, will represent Australia, and I caught the locals training at Tottenham Technical School this week. If it was a "light training session", as manager Bill Taylor claimed, I'd hate to see a dinkum match. Six-man teams try to catch a rubber ball in a small net at the end of sticks they wave as clubs and then throw the ball into the net of an ice hockey goal".

The team, which was selected in early March 1978, after extensive trials in Melbourne, which limited the number of possible participants from S.A. and W.A., included 15 Victorians, Peter Koshnitsky and Grant Evans (S.A.) and Greg Kennedy (W.A.), with Ken Read as coach, Bill Taylor as manager and Clive Carr as ALC representative. The selectors were coach Ken Read and former Australian player and VALA President Phil Humphreys.

Bill Taylor was a very good manager and organizer, and with a career in banking he was always able to "persuade" a few customers to sponsor or provide some support, including Adidas (Tracksuit, 2 pair of running shoes, green and gold T-shirts, collar shirts and uniform shorts), Cooper Tool (Equipment bags for each player), Alexander Clothing (Dress slacks and shirts), Joubert & Joubert (Ken Read's employer – 50 practice T-shirts). The Commonwealth Games Foundation contributed C\$5,000, an anonymous donor \$1,600, and monster BBQ organized by the players raised \$2,726. The playing uniforms were sourced through Eddie Toomey, and while of the highest quality they were long sleeve, which was subsequently found to be less than ideal in the hot summer indoor conditions of Canada.

Sadly Qantas didn't provide any support or discount nor did any of the potential sponsors sought in writing contribute or indeed respond. The team did fly Qantas as it provided the best connections to and from Vancouver via San Francisco.

One initiative that did go down well in Canada with hosts and playing opponents were Australian box lacrosse T-shirts, caps and kangaroo pins. Whatever the team took they could have taken twice as much and still not had enough.



Back row (L to R): Rick Benedierks, Peter Swainger, Doug Carter, Gary Smithwick, Greg Mollison, Cliff Jennings, Grant Evans & Paul Mollison

Middle row: Graeme "Bluey" Antrim, Tony Lewer, Greg Kennedy, Dennis Newman, John Nolan, Ian "Benny" Barker, Mark Stephen, Peter Koshnitsky & Norm Haley

Front row: Ken Read, Clive Carr, Bill Taylor & Harold Doerner (Captain)



The team was well received in Canada throughout its stay and was billeted with local lacrosse people and the hospitality was outstanding throughout the tour.

Upon arrival the players were staggered, surprised, overwhelmed when they saw the stick skills, shooting accuracy and speed and the aggressive stick checking of the Canadians. After witnessing their first training session the team en masse went to the major lacrosse outlet in Vancouver to buy appropriate gloves, box sticks (Rather than plastic that many had), rib and kidney pads, arm and shoulder pads, protectors as well as the goalkeepers buying essential hockey pants, leg guards, neck guards and anything else that was available. This was standard gear for all Canadian

players, it was essential and at that stage a plastic stick was never seen in the hands of a Canadian box player.

The team arrived in Vancouver via San Francisco on 30 July and following a salmon cookout on the second night got down to training the next morning, and had two heavy training sessions before their first game. There was a major disaster upon arrival in Vancouver – there was a beer strike!!! So what do you do when there is no beer? You contact the Australian consulate, which in turn locates some free beer for the visitors from Seattle, just over the border in the U.S. – Olympia beer!! Fortunately the strike didn't last too long and beer was readily available for the remainder of the trip and it was needed as Australians were not used to playing indoor in the middle of summer, in some of the hottest places in Canada, with uniforms that perhaps weren't the most appropriate for the conditions, and certainly weren't appropriate as the 1967 team found when they purchased the much needed protective equipment. The two goalkeepers, John Nolan and Peter Koshnitsky basically had to get alternative significantly larger tops to house their protective equipment and didn't need shorts as they wore hockey pants.

Not sure how but the ANZA Club, which was a local club in Vancouver with its point of existence being to welcome visiting Australian and NZ teams, was responsible for our billeting and hospitality in Vancouver. Our point of contact was Bill Templeton, who gave up his work for 2 weeks to support the team off the court, including a welcoming party at the ANZA Club in Vancouver, sorting out laundry for the entire team and anything else that was asked of him – he was amazing. There was no room on the bus for Bill through the interior and through the Canadian Rockies, but he was there waiting for the team when it arrived in Edmonton and continued helping wherever he could.

The team trained every day in Vancouver at the Vancouver Burrards stadium and were assisted in training by their coach, Ross McDonald and several of their players. Having come out of the middle of winter Canadian summer temperatures made the training sessions very trying with the coach insisting they practice in their recently acquired protective equipment.

The team created a good impression with the locals and after each game came to the centre of the court and clapped the crowd, which was greatly appreciated. In the first practice game the Australians were defeated 30-8 by the North Shore Indians. "Within seconds of the sounding horn to end the game", Mr Rick Richards, Chairman, Senior Directorate, British Columbia Lacrosse Association wrote: "the entire Australian team met at the centre of the floor, turned to the 1,500-2,000 spectators and as a team started to clap their hands. The spectators immediately rose and gave the Australians a standing ovation. Never have I seen a display of sportsmanship such as I witnessed that night, and I am convinced the spectators were of the same opinion." After the game the team was invited back to the North Shore reservation, which was quite an experience!

On 4 August the team travelled by bus to Armstrong, a long day on the road, arrived early afternoon in Armstrong in time to get acquainted with their hosts and prepare for the game against the Armstrong Shamrocks. The game was played to a capacity crowd and the Australians showed a significant improvement on their first game to lose 17-14 in a very physical encounter. The team was again billeted by the local team and supporters and put on a

“Cookout” after the game. This is where the team learned some new phrases like “He’s a good fart”, which is a compliment!

From Armstrong the team bussed to Prince George, 4-5 hours north of Armstrong through the interior, and was again well received by the locals but went down in a disappointing performance to the Prince George Royals 19-11.

Another funny incident where a local by the name of the “Beast” arrived, saw a follicle challenged Clive Carr seated with his back to him, went up and gracefully spat on his head and started polishing!! Clive was somewhat shocked or dismayed, but being the champion he was he laughed it off and had another beer!

The travelling, training and playing was starting to take its toll, with the daily training along with the physicality of the Canadian checking and speed of the game, something not seen in Australia. If the team wasn’t travelling and playing it was training and playing and the players were not used to backing up day after day to such a fast and physically aggressive game, but the team combined very well and what they lacked in box lacrosse experience they made up for in endeavour and a never say die attitude.

The team travelled through the Canadian Rockies, which for anyone who has travelled through the Rockies would acknowledge one of the prettiest and most pristine places in the world to see, but slow going in a coach, which left a lot of time for banter and getting to know each other. While the team was improving it was evident that the players had much to learn about box lacrosse. Did we mention the “Mooning” incident when the bus passed a very slow driver through the Rockies?

The team arrived in Edmonton, which was hosting the 1978 Commonwealth Games, and lacrosse being the national summer sport of Canada, was admitted as a demonstration sport. The atmosphere for the Commonwealth Games was fabulous as were the venues. Given the event every team member required security clearance and identity cards in order to access venues.

The team stayed at St Mary’s School, which provided very basic dormitory style accommodation, but it was comfortable and wasn’t too far to training or to watch any of the other Games events, although the training facilities were not particularly good as the facility was undergoing renovations.

Edmonton was a major hub for energy exploration and development in Alberta and a growth area in Canada, enjoyed a reasonable climate and was a good location to stage the Games.

In the first match the Edmonton Capitals defeated Australia 25 – 8. Following the match some of the local Capitals players and some of the senior A players gave some personalized training along with assistance from their trainers, which was invaluable. In the second match in Edmonton the team showed continuing improvement and went down to the Edmonton Fullers 18 – 10, after trailing 8 – 1 in the first period, and things were starting to look up and confidence was building.

The third and final game was very close and a great conclusion to the tour, witnessed by 11,000 spectators, who saw an Australian team that had learnt so much in 2 weeks, nearly take out victory over an experienced box lacrosse team.

After Edmonton the team played 2 field lacrosse matches in LA (Orange County All stars) and San Francisco (NCLA All Stars), and were billeted by lacrosse players and families during that time.

There was every indication that box lacrosse would develop in Australia. The ALC congratulated the Canadian association on their magnificent effort in demonstrating lacrosse in one of its forms to other Commonwealth nations. A box lacrosse world championship was being planned for 1980, to which Australia had already been invited and had accepted the invitation. The ALC realised at this time the difficulties it must face to assemble a team worthy of international box lacrosse standards against much tougher competition.

In his report coach Ken Read made the following points on the preparation and conduct of the tour:-

- Given only 3 members of the team were from outside Victoria the vast majority of the team trained together every Wednesday night and Sunday morning along with their field lacrosse commitments, thus there was no question as to the fitness of the team.
- Stickwork drills focused on short sharp passes, ambidextrous play was encouraged and a reduction in playing area to resemble the Canadian conditions. He also noted that the team was so fixated with proving itself overseas that he had no doubt that the will to win was always present in every member and it was the most harmonious team he had ever been associated with.
- On reflection the coach felt the team should not have trained every day, particularly in the hot conditions, as it impacted on the player stamina towards the end of the tour.
- On the final game he noted "Our last game against the Edmonton Fullers was proof of our learning process and the true dedication of our players. We received excellent coaching from members of the Capitals team and although we carried several injuries, each player gave 100% and we narrowly lost to a team that had the benefit of watching us the night before".
- "It is not my intention to supply a critique on each player but two players deserve extra special mention, they are John Nolan and Peter Koshnitsky. John for his abilities on and off the arena. He won the best team man trophy unanimously awarded by the 3 man executive. Peter for his dedication to the sport. His thirst for knowledge to improve not only his personal game but the team's efforts proved very helpful indeed. The sportsmanship of both men is a credit to them and our game."
- The conduct of the team was a credit to Australian lacrosse. Ken Read also noted that the 3 man executive of Bill Taylor, Clive Carr and himself worked well together as an executive. As for future trips he suggested that box sticks be compulsory, that protective equipment be available prior to departure, a minimum of 21 players and maximum of 24 be selected, and 3 days between matches.

In his report to ALC the team manager, Bill Taylor, made the following comments:-

- The arrangements made by the Canadian associations were adhered to, the team was met at all destinations and billeting handled extremely well. In the U.S. not quite as much work had been put into the billeting and organization and minor problems arose, but were sorted out.

- With one exception, towards the end of the tour in LA, the discipline and behaviour of the team was exemplary. Comments to this effect were received from numerous and varied sources and a letter from the Chairman of the BCLA to the ALC President commented favourably on the team's sportsmanship throughout the tour.
- One player failed to arrive at the airport in LA and missed the flight to San Francisco and could not be located for several days. He did finally arrive in San Francisco to join the team for the homeward bound flight, and forfeited his \$50 bond. Bill Taylor recommended the bond be increased to \$100!
- Bill Taylor also emphasized that the Canadians loved our memorabilia and suggested that future trips should have the T-shirts, caps and pins pre-shipped for use on the tour, even foreshadowing merchandising opportunities at playing venues.
- The use of aluminium handles and plastic heads was seen as a mistake and proved far less efficient than hickory sticks. Bent handles resulting from legitimate crosse checking and loss of ground balls due to superior box-stick efficiency had a large bearing on our lack of success. Players must use the box-stick, become proficient with its different throwing action and treat box lacrosse as a vigorous spectator sport where rules other than the basics are only used when the game gets out of hand.
- Bill Taylor concluded that he, the coach and ALC representative combined extremely well. He also suggested that while a trainer was provided from time to time, it was essential in Canada and all future teams should take a trainer/tape man or a physio, or a combination thereof.

"Following a runaway win by the North Shore Indians (30-8), the calibre of our team increased dramatically with each practice and game. At all points we were given assistance with coaching and scrimmage against experienced Canadian players. This culminated in an emotional scene at the Coliseum in Edmonton where we went down to the Edmonton Fullers 14-11, with the result being in the balance up to the last few minutes of the game. The crowd of 11,000 applauded both teams for eight to ten minutes after the finish of the game. The senior A demonstration that followed played to a crowd of only 3,000".

The cost of the trip to the 18 players and 3 members of the executive was \$906/person, which covered all domestic and international flights, presentations plaques and team souvenirs, blazers and pants and protective equipment, which was a remarkably good outcome, thanks in the main to Bill Taylor obtaining sponsorships and the fundraising efforts of the team, which raised nearly \$9,000, thus reducing the cost of the trip substantially.

Communications with the CLA confirmed that the proposed World Series of box lacrosse was now definite, and that England and U.S.A. would be invited. An invitation to the Australian team to play a series of matches in May 1979 was also proposed to gain maximum experience without the problems of travel.

The inaugural Australian box lacrosse team and tour was a success and the players and management were committed to helping box lacrosse to grow in Australia.

While it was not unusual for many of the elite of our game to be unavailable for such tours Australia certainly selected one of the most cohesive and determined teams to travel overseas. Like previous tours the team came in for a few surprises, perhaps

shock, at how this great game was played in other parts of the world, including having the appropriate protective equipment, uniforms, etc.

Overall while a wonderful experience and a success it was a gruelling trip, with the team travelling virtually daily after the Vancouver warm-up game, and generally playing most days after long bus trips. It was also physically demanding from the playing point of view, as the Canadian checking and shooting was something that the team had never experienced, and upon arrival in Canada goalkeepers and alike were scurrying to the Vancouver sports stores to gear up as the protective equipment they came with, including goalkeepers, was totally inadequate for what they were about to encounter.

What did we learn?

Every person on that tour came away converted, almost fanatical, to the game of box lacrosse. It was fast, it was aggressive (Although the players were equipped accordingly), it drew big crowds everywhere they went, and the fans loved it. The game was contained in a box, there was nowhere for the ball to go other than back into play, there was always something happening, and you only had 30 seconds to get a shot away otherwise you lost the ball. This was a true spectator sport, where you didn't have to know the rules but you had to pay attention as the ball moved very quickly and cleverly.

The team certainly learnt that box lacrosse was the future of the game and we had a lot of learning to do as it is entirely different to field lacrosse, demanding greater stick skills and possibly more strategic plays and tactics. The goal is so much smaller, the goalkeeper takes up more room, so shots have to be more accurate, picks and blinds have to be set and countered, the ball has to be moved quickly in a very confined area.

Another lesson learnt for future trips was a more breathable and loose fitting uniform was required, particularly in the summer months of Canada.

Scores don't always indicate the success of a tour, but this was a very successful inaugural box lacrosse tour and Australia was leading the way in box lacrosse outside of Canada. Well done Australia.