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... Americans have always loved the game of horseshoes bigtime, and like their Canadian counterparts, have organized competitions for decades. The U.S. even has an equivalent of baseball's "World Series" for the sport; their annual "World Tournament" of horseshoe pitching. It's happened every year since 1909. This summer will be only the second time in history

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Playing fields

Horseshoe pitching is a game enjoyed by many rural Manitobans.

BY LORRAINE STEVENSON
FIW staff

It's played at the local fair, the sports day, the community picnic, usually in small groups. They'll be chatting amiably, laughing, letting out the occasional hoot. They'll have that unmistakable demeanor of relaxed people, the kind who know how to enjoy themselves out of doors.

They're pitching horseshoes. Rural Manitobans lay a strong claim to the game by the sheer numbers who play it. There would be "loads of them," says Grandview farmer Shirley Ann Fisher. "I'd say hundreds and hundreds. There's lots of people who go out for a friendly game of horseshoes."

If there's anyone familiar with the sport in Manitoba, it would be Fisher. She's president of the Manitoba Horseshoe Association, (MHA). This lady can pitch horseshoes like nobody's business; she's been ladies' provincial champion 15 years out of the last 25. Playing the game since a kid, Fisher says she probably started pitching in earnest in her 20s. It began on balmy evenings on their farm, when she and her husband would head out to pitch after supper. She was soon tossing 40 feet, no problem.

Forty feet is the regulation distance men in competitions pitch. It wasn't too long after, she was introduced to Bert Snart. If she could pitch 40 feet, he told her, she should get into the sport competitively. Ladies are only required to throw 30 feet.

"He came along, and told me he'd like to see me get into provincial championships," recalls. She did.

Fisher speaks of Snart like everyone should know him. Those familiar with horseshoe pitching, and who know about interesting aspects of Manitoba's history, certainly do. The Dauphin-area man essentially revived the game of horseshoe pitching across this province.

That was after the Second World War, which had basically put a stop to it. Before the war, horseshoe pitching had been popular everywhere, including this province, as a leisurely, no-cost sport that helping thousands pass the tedious times of the Depression.

A champion horseshoe pitcher himself, Snart would see provincial pitching championships resume in Manitoba in 1950. He's perhaps even better known for having brought the Canadian nationals to Manitoba too. That was in 1970, when, for the first time, they were held in Dauphin instead of Toronto's Royal Winter Fair, where they'd been held every year since their beginning in 1927. The Bert Snart trophy today still circulates among the men's Canadian Champions.

Attraction

The popularity of horseshoe pitching — not to mention its origins — is extensive, and goes much farther and deeper than its Canadian rural roots. "They often say it's the American game," says Andre Leclerc, author of History of Horseshoe Pitching in Canada, published in July 2001.

Americans have always loved the game of horseshoes bigtime, and like their Canadian counterparts, have organized competitions for decades. The U.S. even has an equivalent of baseball's "World Series" for the sport; their annual "World Tournament" of horseshoe pitching. It's happened every year since 1909. This summer will be only the second time in history

its been held outside the U.S.: it's coming to Red Deer, Alberta on July 28.

Here in Canada, horseshoe pitching has its own devotees, albeit in smaller numbers compared to many other games and sports enjoyed here. Leclerc says there's an estimated 2,500 players officially signed on with associations across the country.

But that doesn't account for the many thousands more who love the game, and play for sheer enjoyment.

Antiquity

The game itself dates back into antiquity, when there was an abundance of horses and spare time, and more people living in the country who had plenty of both.

A careful historian, Leclerc tried to document the earliest references to the sport's origins, and finds they go back to around 1750. It would go back, much further than that, he concedes. The earliest North American reference he found about soldiers during the American Revolution winning a battle — soldiers who were known for tossing horseshoes in their down time.

"I'd say hundreds and hundreds. There's lots of people who go out for a friendly game of horseshoes."

— SHIRLEY ANN FISHER, PRESIDENT OF THE MANITOBA HORSESHOE ASSOCIATION

One of Canada's earliest documented references to the game played here, Leclerc found right in Manitoba: his research unearthed references to the "diversion camps" for laborers building the railway from Emerson to St. Boniface between 1878 and 1883. "In their spare time they played horseshoes and formed a league," says Leclerc.

Attraction

Longstanding ties between the game and the farm and rural life are obvious.

As Fisher herself attests to, most players get their first taste playing on the farm, often starting off tossing around the shoes the horse wasn't wearing anymore. Leclerc got hooked at the family cottage in Quebec, as a child. His family played extensively. He'll wager more rural Canadians pitch horseshoes than their urban counterparts, but enjoyment of the sport is not exclusively theirs. If more rural people play, he said, it's for the simple reason they're the ones with the easiest access to a place to play it: anywhere outdoors.

That it's an outdoor game is probably where much of its appeal lies, he adds. There's just something wonderful about being out in the sunshine and fresh air, enjoying a challenging yet not overly taxing sport, he said. Twenty bucks will usually buy you a pair of "sanctioned shoes" at a sporting goods store. These are shoes that weigh just over 2 pounds, and are of the dimensions approved by Horseshoe Canada for playing competitively. A little more square than regular horseshoes, they aren't shoes your horse would wear. They have stories and names associated with them too, like "the Canuck shoe" and "Elmer Hohl shoe" and horseshoe players will long debate the merits of the various types of shoes.

The Manitoba Horseshoe Association is always pleased to mail out the

game's rules and regulations to anyone requesting them.

Yet, what may contribute to horseshoe pitchings decline may be the scarcity of its most precious resource: spare time.

Enthusiastic as she is, Fisher admits to being a little worried over the MHA's narrowing ranks. They're down to about 40 right now. It wasn't that long ago they had about 200, says Leclerc, who is familiar with the rise and fall of membership numbers in associations across the country. Manitoba, he says, has unfortunately seen one of the steepest drops in provincial association membership in recent years.

The main problem is the sport suffers from lack of visibility. The sport gets precious little media coverage, notes Leclerc. Yet, there was a time, when horseshoe pitching and its champions were big news. He chuckles as he recollects newspaper clippings he found, while researching his book, describing parades down the streets of Sarnia, with thousands of cheering onlookers, for the city's returning provincial champions. "It was like the Stanley Cup," he laughs.

Fisher says she'd like a few more resources put into helping groups like the MHA promote the sport. Like many minor games and sports, the dollars committed to them are shrinking, not growing over time, she said. Sport Manitoba cut out the base grant for several of the smaller sports a few years ago and that meant less dollars for the MHA too. Today they do what they can with the revenues of just one bingo — about \$1,500.

"It's pretty hard to run an organization on that," she says. "All the big sports get big money, and the small sports can hardly survive."

Still, there's a chance horseshoe pitching may be just hiding its own sweet time. As one of those soul-restorative things that, on the whole, busy people wouldn't fathom doing, it may come back when more Canadians, both urban and rural, have their afternoons off. An aging population is "probably a good thing for horseshoe pitching," says Leclerc. "We have difficulty attracting new people year after year, juniors and younger players... but on the other side, we compensate by getting more of the aging people into the game."

August 31 - September 1

Those interested in seeing some Manitoba-style horseshoe pitching in the meantime, might want to mark August 31 and September 1 on their calendars and head for Austin. There the provincial championships will take place in the heritage building on the grounds of the Manitoba Agricultural Museum.

Don't be shy about signing up to compete, even if you're just playing for fun at home, insists the province's longtime ladies' champion. "I think some people don't play in provincial championships, because they're feel they're not good enough," says Fisher. That should not be a reason. "You won't be up against people who play better than you, she explains.

You'll be placed in categories that match your own skill.

Want more information about the game of horseshoes? Contact the Manitoba Horseshoe Association at (204) 546-3226.