

Con Jones: Soccer Entrepreneur Writ Large

The Man who built Callister Park and Founded the first Coast League

In 1903, Vancouver saw the arrival of Con Jones, a flamboyant Australian entrepreneur who would turn out to be a driving force in soccer in BC for the next 25 years, promoting professional soccer, launching the first Pacific Coast League, and founding Con Jones Park, which later became the legendary Callister Park.

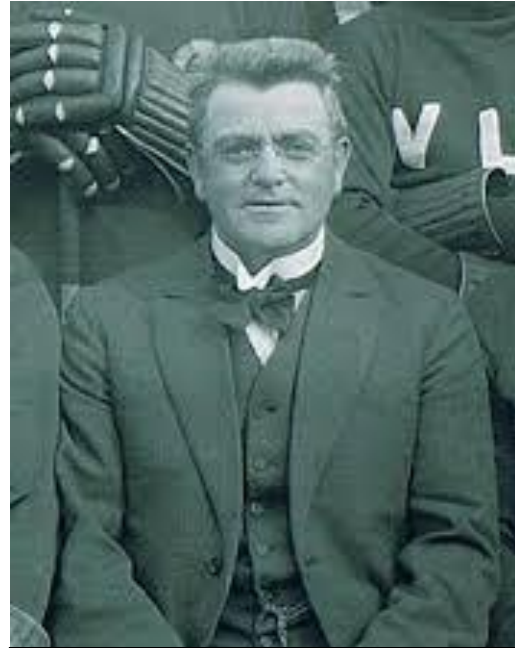
Little is known about Con Jones' early life, other than he was born in Sydney, Australia in 1869 and may have been a bookie. He arrived in Vancouver in 1903, and in the 25 years until his death in 1929, his innovations upended soccer in BC a number of times. Said to be a true sportsman and honest in business, Con Jones' impact on soccer in BC was significant.

"Don't Argue"

Within a year of his arrival in Vancouver, Jones proved himself to be a very successful entrepreneur. He quickly opened a chain of tobacconists, pool halls and bowling alley. The tobacconist business was the heart of his empire and success. Jones' logo and branding were distinctive, as was his slogan: "Don't Argue". The yellow signage with a graphic of a man muzzling another appeared widely, and it is believed Jones had the first neon sign to appear in Vancouver.

Con Jones became one of the most successful sports promoters the city has seen, especially in lacrosse and soccer. At that time, lacrosse was a more popular sport than hockey. Jones saw this popularity as an opportunity, and became central to the formation of the BC Lacrosse Professional League, featuring his team Vancouver Athletic Club.

Jones recruited star lacrosse players from Eastern Canada to compete against the champion New Westminster Salmonbellies. His Vancouver AC team won the national



Con Jones

championship Minto Cup in 1911, in front of 14,000 spectators at Recreation Park - lacrosse was a commercial and sporting success for Jones.



Pacific Coast League

Not content with lacrosse, Jones also instituted a new soccer league. In 1908, he and his perennial associate Will Ellis promoted and started the Pacific Coast Association Football League. In its first season, the league had five teams representative of their cities: Nanaimo (the league winners), Ladysmith, Vancouver (Jones' team), Victoria and Seattle. The league was initially amateur, but in 1910, Jones and Ellis switched the league to professional play. The first pro "season" seems to have been two Vancouver teams, the Rovers and the Callies playing a two-team three-game league, with Nanaimo and Ladysmith later joining.

The plans for professional play were very contentious, instituting a battle royal with the BC Amateur Athletic Union, who insisted on complete separation of professional and amateur sport. The acrimonious dispute led to the dissolution of the first BC Football Association and the professional team players were banned from local amateur soccer and other sports. In 1911 Cumberland and Victoria were said to be joining the pro circuit, but the league seems to have faded away.

New Association, Canada and Professionals

In 1918, Jones' next innovation was a summer soccer league. Then, in 1919, the professional/amateur issue became contentious again, with Con Jones yet again at the centre of the controversy. John Russell and Dave Leith were the leaders of the BC Football Association at the time, but the BCFA had not affiliated with the Dominion of Canada Football Association (DCFA), choosing to affiliate with the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, which forbade professional play. Jones formed a rival provincial body, the BC Provincial Football Association, leading a group of eight of the 56 clubs in BC to apply for national affiliation.

In February 1920, the DCFA, who governed both amateur and professional soccer, sided with Jones and accepted the new association's

affiliation. At the same meeting, the national body also agreed to Jones going to the UK to encourage and finance a pro team (Newcastle United preferred) to tour Canada, in return for receiving 15 percent of the net proceeds.

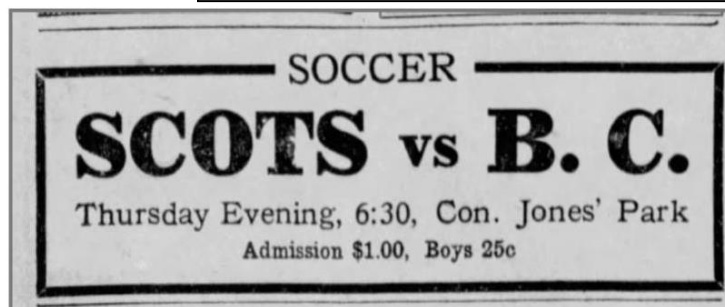
With professional play then sanctioned, in 1921 Jones launched a professional league to play at the new Con Jones Park. The opening game, then billed as Vancouver's first professional soccer game, saw Nanaimo beat Vancouver Celtics 2-1. Very few other pro games are recorded, the league not seeming to catch on, with Jones returning to focus on lacrosse.

After the DCFA ruling, the two provincial bodies seem to have come together quickly. The leading light of the old BCFA, John Russell became President in 1920-21, going on to be national President and one of the foremost leaders in BC's soccer history. The Newcastle tour did not happen, but a Scottish FA team of professionals (under the Third Lanark club name) toured Canada the following year, 1921. Their game versus BC All-Stars was part of opening week action at Con Jones Park.

One significant effect of this chapter was that national affiliation allowed entry into the Canadian national championships. In 1921, Ladysmith became BC's first representative in the Connaught Cup, losing to Toronto Scottish. In 1923 Nanaimo Wanderers won BC's first national championship, beginning the province's tally of 50 championships to date.

In 1925, a second version of the Pacific Coast League began play. The next season, Jones launched a competitive league, the "BC Inter-City League", but this did not get off the ground.

Vancouver Sun - Tuesday 21st June 1921



Con Jones (Callister) Park

While some of Jones' initiatives were short-lived and perhaps had more impact on his tobacco sales than the long-term evolution of soccer, no-one can doubt – Don't Argue! - about the importance of his biggest legacy - building what became the spiritual home of soccer in Vancouver.

Up to 1912, Jones' lacrosse team played at Recreation Park, at Smithe and Homer downtown. The CPR then sold that land for development, so in 1913 Jones moved his team out to Hastings Park. In 1920, Jones purchased land across Renfrew from Hastings Park, building a fully-enclosed sports stadium primarily for lacrosse and soccer with seating for 6,000 plus more in standing room. Opening games included the first game in his new (short-lived) Pacific Coast Professional League on June 21st 1921 and on June 23rd, the game between the touring Scottish FA team and the BC All-Stars.

Con Jones Park was to become the home of soccer in Vancouver for fifty years. Jones died in 1929 following a stroke while watching a soccer game at his park. In June 1934, the grandstands at the park burnt down but were quickly rebuilt by his sons. In 1942, the family of the original owners, the Stevenson's, reclaimed the park, as the Jones's had defaulted on mortgage payments and not paid city taxes. In lieu of the taxes, Mrs. Ada Stevenson gave the park to the City of Vancouver on condition it be renamed Callister Park, after her uncle, John Callister.

Con Jones Park 1924



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This biography was completed to document one of BC Soccer's earliest innovators and pioneers. As a businessman strong on promotion, Con Jones' sports activities were very well covered and documented in contemporary newspapers.

Primary sources for this report are:

- Original research with Newspapers.com
- Canadian Lacrosse Hall of Fame
- Colin Jose: The Story of Soccer in Canada
- Dave Unwin: From the Sidelines
- Dave Fryatt: Various articles

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The report may have errors and omissions, and the various sources differ on some issues. If you have information to improve this please contact Roger Barnes at 604-803-2956 or roger@rogerbarnes.ca

BC Soccer is compiling its documentary heritage. If you have programs, reports or other memorabilia of the history of soccer in BC, please contact archives@bcsoccer.net.

The park continued as the premier soccer venue in Vancouver, the home of Pacific Coast League and the visiting European pro team games, until Empire Stadium was built nearby for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1954.

Etched into the memories of many soccer stalwarts, Callister continued as the home of the PCL until 1970, when the facilities were demolished and Callister was turned into a neighbourhood park, which it remains today.