

Water games: the location of water-based sports events at the 1997 Canada Games

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Abstract: The 1997 Canada Games were held in Brandon, Manitoba from 9 to 23 August. The choice of the City of Brandon as a site for the games was a coup for this urban area, but also created problems for the local organizers with respect to the location of some of the events. Included in the games are 18 sports, some land-based and others water-based. In this paper we shall concentrate on the water-based events, in particular those which take place outdoors. Outdoor water-based sports include canoeing and rowing, sailing, and water-skiing. Although the games were associated in people's minds with Brandon, suitable facilities did not exist within the city limits for all the sports. This was particularly true of the outdoor water events. It was possible to modify the Assiniboine River in Brandon to accommodate the requirements for water-skiing, but events in the other sports had to be located outside the city, in rural Westman: the canoeing/rowing at Minnedosa Lake and the sailing at Pelican Lake. In this paper we shall discuss the specific physical requirements for water-based sports, the locational options that were available, and the sites that were finally chosen.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increase in the amount of leisure time available to people in general and to those in the western world in particular. Associated with this growth has been an increase in demand for recreational pursuits to fill these discretionary hours, and recognition of recreation not only as a major land use and industry, but also as a valid area for academic study (Ryan 1991: x). Although geographers are usually not

interested in all activities designed to fill this newly created void, they are especially interested in outdoor recreation.¹

“Canada is blessed with rich and varied opportunities for people to participate in outdoor recreation” (Wall 1989: vii). Although the image of Manitoba held by many Canadians is of a uniform and even boring landscape, the province has a variety of physical and human environments, many of which are conducive to, and attractive for, outdoor recreation (Everitt 1997). Whereas Winnipeg tends to concentrate on urban and cultural attractions, rural Manitoba (outside “The Perimeter”) is noted for outdoor activities, and as a result, recreation has become a major contributor to the economy of Manitoba (Gill 1996: 289).²

Although, on average, most recreation time and money in Manitoba is spent by Manitobans, this is not the case for “mega-events,” which by their nature are designed to attract people from far-off parts, thus boosting the economy of a region and at the same time helping to make for a successful event (Butler 1997). A mega-event is difficult to define in some instances. A “happening” of major significance to Holland, Manitoba, for instance, might not be of great importance to Winnipeg. However, the event to be discussed in this paper, the Canada (Summer) Games would qualify as “mega” on a Canadian scale, by whatever definition.

There was considerable excitement in the City of Brandon when the community was awarded the 1997 Canada Games, as the Games bring with them the promise of an influx of paying customers, national exposure in the media, and the prospect of the development of physical facilities that would not otherwise be economically feasible.

However, when a community is awarded “the Games” it undertakes to provide the necessary facilities for 18 different sports, of which 12 are land-based and 6 (canoeing, diving, rowing, sailing, swimming and water-skiing) are water-based. As noted above, part of the rationale for the awarding of the Games to small communities is to encourage them to build facilities that they would not normally be able to afford. With limited exceptions, Brandon was able to provide the physical requirements for the various sports. We shall concentrate on the water-based sports because they presented the greater challenge for the organizers. In addition such

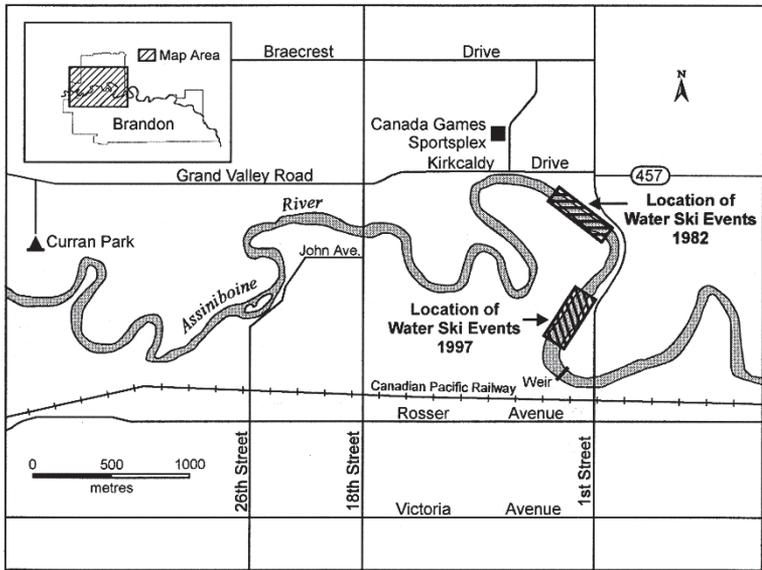


Figure 1: The Assiniboine River at Brandon.

sports are not commonly associated with a small city - prairie environment and arguably provide a more valuable case study for recreational geographers.

The swimming and some diving were held at the pre-existing Sportsplex which dates from the Canada Winter Games held in Brandon in 1979 (Figure 1). However, this facility was not completely acceptable as it has only 6 lanes whereas ideally 8 lanes should be available. Also, a second warm up pool is required within reasonable distance of the competition pool and there is not one of a sufficiently high standard in Brandon. Moreover, the Sportsplex pool has limited facilities for spectators; so the only people allowed to watch the swimming events were the competitors, coaches, parents of competitors, and members of the media.

The Sportsplex pool was unacceptable for diving except for one metre springboard diving. At an early planning stage, the city had projected the building of an outdoor diving facility near an existing pool at Curran Park at the western edge of the city (Figure 1). The building of the diving boards would have been combined

with the construction of a series of water slides to ensure subsequent use. However, the projected development proved to be too expensive, and consequently the three metre and tower diving had to be held at the Pan Am Pool in Winnipeg.

Fortunately these were the only instances in which Brandon was delinquent in providing facilities. However, the other water-based events (water-skiing, canoeing and rowing, and sailing) provided some problems for a city which has only one significant water body, the Assiniboine River, within its boundaries. Thus, it was necessary to look outside the city for suitable locations for the canoeing and rowing (taken as one sport) and sailing events.

In all cases when choosing a location the organizers asked themselves two questions: 1) is there a club or other group near the venue that will help to plan and run the events? and 2) if money is put into developing a venue, is it likely that it will be used in later years?

Water-Skiing

As the Assiniboine River is the only water body in Brandon it was inevitable that it would be considered as a venue for the water events. It had some advantages as a location for water-skiing:

- 1) There is a water-ski club in Brandon that could help organize the competition.
- 2) This being the case it was likely that facilities developed for the Games would be used in subsequent years.
- 3) Water-skiing competitions have been held on the Assiniboine before (the Western Canadian Water Ski Championships in 1982), although in a slightly different location from that eventually selected (Welsted 1989).
- 4) It is within the city and therefore provides easy access for spectators.
- 5) The existence of a weir at Third Street meant that a regular water level could be maintained during the games (Figure 1).
- 6) Parts of the river are sheltered; therefore rough water was not likely to be a problem.

There were, of course, some obvious disadvantages:

- 1) The Assiniboine is a meandering river with few straight stretches.

- 2) The river is narrow and shallow.
- 3) Water quality is not good.
- 4) The river has a current which is a factor when considering whether records have been achieved.

Despite these disadvantages the events were held on the river. The problems were either overcome or ignored. A relatively straight stretch of the river was chosen just above the weir at Third Street (Figure 1). At this location the river was widened and deepened, so that it was broad enough and deep enough for the competitors, and at the same time the banks were given a more gentle slope. This provided safety for the skiers as well as access for spectators, and as the excavation was in a park area of the city, there was relatively little impact on prior land use. As far as we know there were no complaints about the water quality and we are told that the current in the river dropped to an acceptable speed just before the competition began.³

The Manitoba Department of the Environment required an assessment of this site under the Environment Act.⁴ One outcome of the assessment was a requirement to monitor sediment passing along the river before, during, and after construction (Terry and McGinn 1998). Another assessment was required under the Manitoba Heritage Resources Act. Fortunately the resulting study found no archaeological sites at this location.⁵

Canoeing and Rowing

These sports have different requirements from water-skiing:

- 1) The course has to be longer -- 1000 metres in the case of canoeing, and 2000 metres in the case of rowing.
- 2) The water body has to be wide enough to accommodate 6 lanes.
- 3) There should be little or no flow in the water. These ruled out the Assiniboine as a possible venue and attention inevitably focussed on Minnedosa Lake (Figure 2), an artificial lake created by the damming of the Little Saskatchewan River (Punak and Welsted 1989).

The location had several advantages:

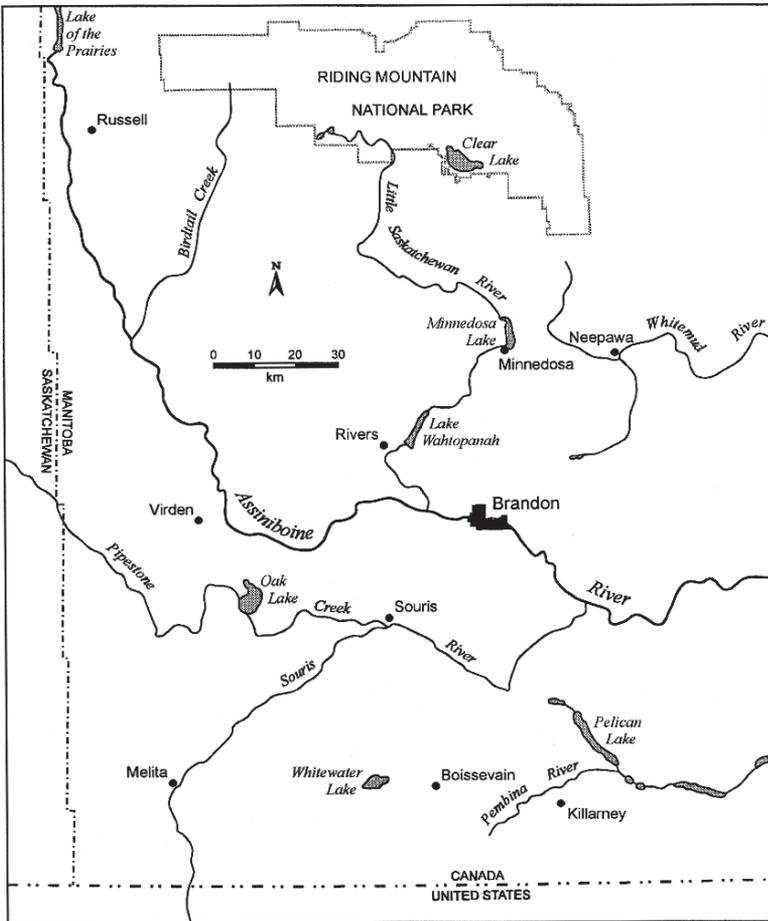


Figure 2: Water bodies of southwest Manitoba.

- 1) An interested community in Minnedosa who would help with the organization of the events and would ensure subsequent use of the facilities.⁶
- 2) Although not in Brandon, it is within easy commuting distance of the Games centre, and Minnedosa itself provides a good pool of spectators.
- 3) The lake is long, yet wide enough to carry the necessary lanes.
- 4) It is sheltered to the east and the west.

5) The sides of the Little Saskatchewan Valley provide good spectator view points.

As with any location there were some disadvantages, the main being:

- 1) There was concern about sedimentation at the north end of the lake.⁷
- 2) Water level in the lake can fluctuate depending on inflow from the Little Saskatchewan River and the height of the dam at the outlet in Minnedosa. However, the problems were not insurmountable. No dredging of the lake was required, although the starting point of the 2000 metre rowing events at the north end of the lake was close to shallow water. Some weed harvesting was done and some beaches were elongated for ease of boat launching and to improve spectator viewing. The Town of Minnedosa controls the dam level and was able to maintain a constant water level during the games. As no construction was involved the Canada Games Society was not required to conduct either an environmental assessment or an assessment of heritage resources in order to have this venue approved.

The venue was a success. Buoys, cables and other equipment purchased for the games have been stored, and it is believed that at least some of the events for the Pan American Games, based in Winnipeg in 1999, will take place on Minnedosa Lake.

Sailing

Sailing on the Assiniboine is not possible, so an alternative had to be found. Clear Lake in Riding Mountain National Park was one possibility,⁸ but the first choice was always Pelican Lake, located 73 km south of Brandon (Figure 2). Pelican Lake has had a chequered history as a recreational resort, depending largely on the water level in the lake (Welsted 1992). The Pembina River Diversion Scheme which aimed to increase and stabilise the level of the lake was completed in 1993 and in the relatively wet years since then the lake level has risen.

As with the other venues, there were advantages and disadvantages to the location:

The advantages were:

- 1) There is a yacht club in the area whose members have been sailing on the lake for many years. They were able to provide the necessary organizational background and ensure that any facilities built would be used in the future.
- 2) The lake is long and relatively narrow, but easily wide enough to set out a competitive course.
- 3) Good steady winds blow along the lake on a regular basis.

Disadvantages were:

- 1) The lake is a considerable distance from Brandon (nearly an hour's drive).
- 2) There is no nearby population base from which to draw which to draw spectators.
- 3) A new breakwater was needed to protect an area for docking and launching.
- 4) The quality of water was poor. The Pembina River diversion scheme has increased the level of the lake but it has not improved water quality.

Despite these drawbacks Pelican Lake proved to be an excellent location. The distance from Brandon and the lack of a large population base in close proximity were not factors as sailing is not a big spectator sport under the best of conditions. A breakwater was built at the north end of the lake. The poor water quality was not a factor as sailors do not expect to spend much time in the water. The Canada Games Society was not required to conduct an assessment of impact on heritage resources, but under the Navigable Waters Pollution Act, the Society was required to include culverts in the breakwater to prevent stagnant water on its landward side, and to install a navigation hazard light at the end of the breakwater.

The event was blessed with a week of warm, sunny, windy weather (on one day it was too windy) enabling the events to proceed smoothly. Improvements to the yacht club house and the building of the breakwater with docking facilities have ensured that future competitions will take place at this location.

Conclusion

Locating and providing the necessary physical facilities for the outdoor water events at the Canada Games was a considerable challenge for the organizers based in a small prairie city. However, at relatively minor cost suitable venues were selected and adapted to provide excellent facilities both for competitors and spectators. In keeping with one of the aims of the Games, the facilities will be preserved and it is likely that all three -- the Assiniboine River, Minnedosa Lake, and Pelican Lake -- will continue be used for sports recreation and that future competitions will take place on them. Unlike some other mega events, the Canada Games held in the Brandon area appear to have achieved most of their stated objectives.

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End Notes

¹.In this paper we shall attempt to avoid many of the terminological pitfalls that characterize a new research area - such as the study of recreation. Thus although tourism and outdoor recreation are closely related -- indeed tourism may be seen as one form of outdoor recreation -- we shall confine ourselves to a discussion of **recreation**.

².Gill points out that tourism, which constitutes one part of outdoor recreation, is the sixth most important contributor to the provincial economy.

³.Cory Gross, Facilities Coordinator, Canada Games, Personal communication, 9 September 1997.

⁴.For details of the fisheries and habitat assessment see *Evaluation of the Proposed Dredging of Assiniboine River Shoreline at Brandon*. Report to Reid Crowther and Partners Ltd by TetrES Consultants Inc. November 1995 (Winnipeg: np).

⁵.*Brandon 1997 Canada Games Waterski Facility Project, Heritage Resources Impact Assessment Final Report* prepared for Brandon 1997 Canada Games Society Inc. by Northern Lights Heritage Services, November 1996 (Brandon : np).

⁶.Lake Wahtopanah, a bigger lake caused by another dam on the Little Saskatchewan River, does not have a history of water-based sports events and in this respect alone it was a less desirable location.

⁷.See "Saving Minnedosa Lake" *The Tribune* (Minnedosa), 31 March 1997, 3.

⁸.The main problem with Clear Lake would have been the difficulty of blocking off a part of the lake from the general public during the busy late summer season.