

Russ Prior

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Russ Prior was a great Canadian athlete who greatly enhanced his sport. He was a fierce competitor who tried his best in all that he did. Russ Prior set Canadian records that would last for decades. Russ Prior was involved in many different types of games throughout his career including the Olympic games, the British Commonwealth games and the Pan American Games. Russ Prior was interviewed and seemed to be quite a humble and down to earth person. Russ Prior is happy to have represented his country internationally at all of these different games.

Russ Prior was born in Hamilton Ontario on July 11, 1949. During high school in Hamilton Russ was involved in many different sports such as football and badminton. Russ began weightlifting to train for football using it to build size and strength to better perform on the football field. Slowly Russ began to lose interest in the other sports and started to focus solely on weightlifting. He began his training in the basement of house parents house under the tutelage of his father. Russ went to the Ontario weightlifting championships where he was able to qualify for a spot on the weightlifting team that was being sent to the British Commonwealth Games of 1970. Russ did this by breaking the Canadian record for his class at the time. One of Russ's favourite lifts came in the year 1968. According to an article in the Toronto Star on Friday February 5, 1971 Russ's favorite lift happened during competition in 1968. In Russ's own words "I was just out of the hospital after an operation on my knee and doctors said it would be six months before my leg was right. I lifted in competition anyways, because it was so much of a challenge, and I broke all the existing Canadian records." In his early career he was a very successful weightlifter. His achievement of making it to the 1970 British Commonwealth Games was no small feat.

Russ Prior had very great success at the British Commonwealth Games. It all began with his first British Commonwealth Games in 1970. The 1970 British Commonwealth Games were held in Edinburgh, Scotland from 16 July to 25 July. It was a big games because it was the first time that the name British Commonwealth Games. Russ went into these games with low expectations. He was not supposed to win anything. Russ defied all the odds and not only did well but stunned everyone by winning the gold medal. Russ won his weight class, the heavyweight class, by defeating Dave Hancock of England who won silver and Price Morris also of Canada who won bronze. The next major event that Russ participated in was the 1974 British Commonwealth Games. At these games there was considerably more pressure on Russ than there was at the games in 1970. The 1974 British Commonwealth Games were held in Christchurch, New Zealand from January 24 to February 2. Russ refused to bow to the pressure and at the young age of 24 he capitalized on his opportunity and won his second British Commonwealth Games medal for his home country of Canada. He beat out John Bolton of New Zealand, who won silver, and John Baret, also of New Zealand, who won bronze. This was quite a big feat because according to an article in the Toronto Star it was amazing that Russ Prior was even at the British Commonwealth in 1974. An article on Thursday January, 31 1974 told a fearsome story. It turns out that shortly after winning Gold in the 1970 British Commonwealth games in Edinburgh, Scotland Russ was almost killed. The article stated that during training exercises in 1971 a weight bench collapsed under Russ depositing a massive amount of weight onto him. Russ suffered extensive spinal damage. Because of this damage Russ was also an inch shorter. After his accident Russ needed to go thru two years of therapy before he could once again

compete in his sport of competitive weight lifting. Russ came back to the sport in 1973 and proceeded to break 13 of his own weightlifting records. The 1974 British Commonwealth Games proved that he was back in full form and able to keep up and beat the best the world had to offer. The years between the 1947 British Commonwealth games in Christchurch, New Zealand and the next British Commonwealth Games was a busy time for Russ.

The period between the 1974 British Commonwealth Games and the 1978 British Commonwealth games was a time of highs and lows for Russ. It began with the Pan American Games of 1975, which were held in Mexico City, Mexico from October 12 to October 26. Canada was not doing well at all in the Pan American Games. They Games were being dominated by the American and Cuban teams. Russ put Canada on the board in a big way when he won three gold medals in the heavyweight class of weightlifting. In all the other weightlifting weight classes the Cubans and the Americans had been cleaning up. After Russ's great success at the Pan American Games the hopes of Canada were resting upon his shoulders the next year as he attended the 1976 Olympic Summer Games. The 1976 Olympic Summer games were held in Montreal, Canada from July 17 to August 1. Russ went into these games as a favorite to win the heavyweight gold medal in his home country. Things were not to be however. Due to a tactical error Russ tried to lift a larger weight in order to intimidate his opponents. He skipped a weight interval and failed. He ended up placing ninth, far from the first place that was expected of him. The hero of the Pan American Games had lost. The gold medal for the heavyweight class went to Yuri Zaitsev of the United Soviet Socialist Republic or the

USSR. What had started so promising back in the 1974 British Commonwealth Games had not come to fruition.

The 1978 British Commonwealth Games gave Russ a chance to redeem himself. The 1978 British Commonwealth games were held in Edmonton, Alberta from August 3 to August 12. At these games Russ came to win and win he did. For the third British Commonwealth games in a row Russ captured the heavyweight gold medal. He defeated Wayne Smith who won silver, also a Canadian, and Andy Drzewiecki of England who captured the Bronze.

The 1978 British Commonwealth Games would be the last major sporting event that Russ would compete in. The fact that the 1980 Olympic Summer Games were held in Moscow, Russia meant that Canada and the United States of America boycotted them, inadvertently robbing Russ of his chance to make up for the mistakes in the 1976 Olympic Summer games. Shortly after this Russ decided to retire to teach in Winnipeg Manitoba.

In his years of competitive weightlifting Russ did not abandon his studies. Russ was a student of Political Science at the University of McMaster. While there he worked as a hotel doorman. One story that was stumbled across in the Toronto Star talked of an assault charge against a Raymond Paulauskas. While on duty Russ had pushed Raymond during an altercation and Raymond had fallen down a flight of stairs and broken his wrist. The Judge ruled that Russ had been too violent and handed him a 100 dollar fine.

Russ was a very accomplished weightlifter and should not be only a Hamilton hero but also a Canadian hero. It would have been interesting to see if he could have won at the Olympic Summer Games in 1980 in Moscow.

The next section is a rewritten interview that was done by a third party, a party that is unknown to me. I would like to thank them for their work.

Russ was asked 16 questions during the interview. Here it is.

How did you get started in weight-lifting? Prior began playing multiple sports in high school, including football. He used weight-lifting to improve his performance in sports. Eventually, weight-lifting became his sole focus. The *Hamilton Spectator* stated that Prior began weight-lifting in his parent's basement under the supervision of his father.

How did you get selected to attend the Games? Prior attended the Ontario weight-lifting championships and qualified for the Commonwealth games. Breaking the records sent him to the Commonwealth Games.

What was your training regimes for the Games? Early in training, Prior did 3-5 hours of resistive training for 5-6 days a week, lifting 50-70 000 pounds per day. It was difficult for Prior to meet the requirements for weight brackets, so he ran 2-3 miles per day and skipped. In addition, he worked on stretching and flexibility and played badminton. Interestingly, Prior was once ranked in Ontario for badminton, which was impressive considering that his body size was not optimal for such a sport.

What it mean to you as an amateur event? Prior felt that amateur athletes were "purer" in earlier Games. According to Prior, by 1978, amateur sport became tainted. He gave an example of his friend, Ken Pride, who Prior felt was an excellent boxer. Because Pride accepted money for archery, he was banned from competing in boxing. In addition, Prior noted that presently, NHL athletes compete in the Olympics; pro athletes compete in

amateur sport, making it less pure. Prior seemed to take pride in amateur sport and apparently felt that it needs more credit.

How did you travel to the Games? How long did it take? In the 1978 Games, Prior move to Edmonton about three months before the Games started to train at one of the best facilities, the Grierson Training Club. Prior pointed out the pre-1978 aid provided by the Canadian Air Force. For the 1974 Games, the Air Force flew him from Picton, Ontario to Vancouver to Hawaii to Pogo Pogo to Christchurch, New Zealand (a 24-hour flight). After the Games, he was flown to Australia for two weeks. The Air Force treated him well, rewarding him (and most likely others) for representing his country. When the government stepped in after 1974, transportation was no longer sustained by the Air Force. Nothing more was said about the 1978 Games.

What is your best memory of the Games? Prior enjoyed the Games he attended equally: "They were all the same. I won them all." His success was memorable. After being prodded, he admitted that his first Games in 1970 were the most memorable as he won gold medals as an underdog.

What is your worst memory of the Games? Prior's least favourite memory was more embarrassing than anything else. During a morning breakfast with other athletes and the Queen, everyone was expected to follow the Queen's lead. When she sat down, everyone quickly followed, except for Prior, who somehow missed the cue. Prior and the Queen's eyes met, and Prior sunk into his seat with shame. After the breakfast, the Queen approached Prior and told him not to feel bad about it, but Prior couldn't help but feel that way.

What did it mean for you to represent your country? Prior described himself as "intensely proud" to represent his country. Prior said, "When I stood on the podium, I smiled. I was happy." This pride was evident throughout his interview. He dedicated his life to represent Canada; it meant a lot to him.

Were there political or cultural issues that surrounded the Games? Russ Prior felt strongly about politics' influence on athletics. He disagreed with the use of athletes as pawns in politic pulls. The example he gave us was not from the Commonwealth Games, but from the 1980 Olympics, which he also attended. At the time, he was ranked fourth in the world. It was his time to shine, but the Russian invasion on Afghanistan changed his dream of winning a medal for Canada. Held in Moscow, the 1980 Olympics were boycotted by both the Americans and Canadians due to their disapproval of Russia's move. Prior couldn't attend because of the boycott.

Who paid for what? Prior was disappointed with the lack of support given to athletes by the Canadian government. He noted that Canada financially aided him only when he was ranked in the top eight or nine in the world. But he implied that the government should have supported him to get to that point. Prior felt that when one dedicates his or her life training to represent their country, the country owes financial support to the athlete. In the *Hamilton Spectator*, Prior was quoted as saying, "I won before [the Canadian government] started giving out educational grants and subsidies to athletes."⁴ The newspaper also referred to his moving to Edmonton three months prior to the Games because of the lack of support at home; no adequate facilities were provided for him.⁵

Were females treated equally? Prior noted that women weight-lifters were as uncommon as male ringette players. At the Commonwealth Games, women generally did not compete in as many games as men. Prior did not feel that women were treated differently at the 1978 Games, but in the world at large, he believes that there was and is inequality between genders. He added that Canadian women's involvement in sports was boosted when a woman was hired as the director of Sports Canada in 1974.

What do you think about the British accusation that Canada was arrogant at the 1978 Games? Prior declared that the British were the "authors of arrogance themselves." He noted that the name of the Games reflects this; it was called the "Empire Games" before "the Commonwealth Games," showing a change in the British attitude. But Prior admitted that in a sense, "all athletes are arrogant." As an athlete matures, he or she learns to become less arrogant.

What do you know about the history of the Commonwealth Games or its progression? Comparing the Games in 1970, '74 and '78 (the ones he attended), Prior said that the competition increased. Bigger performance became more important. He witnessed this himself: competing as a weight-lifter became tougher in later years.

What was the impact of the Games on your life afterwards? Firstly, Prior said that his name surfaced in Canadian media after his success. His name became a "household name" around 1978. It affected his job opportunities as well; after competing in the 1976 Olympics, when the media hyped Canadian athletics, Prior was offered a teaching position in Winnipeg, Manitoba. But it wasn't just his popularity that changed; he also

developed as a person. He matured and became more competent — he could "focus on the task."

Did you attend more than one Games, and if so, can you contrast the experience?

From 1970 to 1974 to 1978, the Games became more competitive.

Have you attended other Games, and if so, can you contrast the Commonwealth with them? Prior attended multiple competitions including the Pan-American Games, the Olympics and the World Championships. Comparing the former three games, Prior commented that the Commonwealth Games are friendly, especially internationally. The Pan-American Games, dominated by America and Cuba (America more now) show more antagonism. The Olympics represent a global community, an idealistic community of athletes. He criticized the greed displayed in company sponsorship of Olympic athletes, which was emphasized by 1996. Prior favoured the Commonwealth Games for the friendly context.

These questions and their answers tell us a lot about who the man Russ Prior was. He was a man that that loved his country and was proud to represent it on the international stage as is demonstrated by his answer to the question "What did it mean for you to represent your country?" The competitions that he went to most obviously shaped his whole life. I thought that a few questions were particularly interesting. The question about the arrogance of the British and their accusation of the Canadians was quite intriguing. The fact that even at these games that were supposed to bring the countries of the world together countries still bickered and argued. Russ's comments show maturity. The fact that he can admit that all of them were arrogant was quite surprising. Another

interesting answer was Russ's answer to the question about women and equality in the games that he attended. His answer shows us that his generation was not quite as wholly focused on equality as we are today. Russ's answer of the question on amateur sport shows us that we may have lost something with our greed of today. The idea that sport has become less pure the more that people make from it is a strong idea that we need to think about more in a society where athletes are paid millions to play.

Russ Prior was a smart and dedicated man. He triumphed in a sport that around his time became very involved in steroid use, especially from the USSR. It would have been most interesting to see if he could have beaten the soviet athletes had he been allowed to participate in the 1980 Olympic Summer Games.

Sources

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Russ Prior Biography and statistics

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Russ Prior¹

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¹ Due to the fact that I could not get a hold of Russ Prior himself this paper cannot be posted online. There is no permission given by the party that this was written about.