

# The Indian Athlete: Exploiting or Exploited?

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It was the purpose of this paper to examine the Nineteenth Century Canadian Indian lacrosse player to determine whether or not he was exploited by his European counterparts, and if so, the manner in which this exploitation occurred. Exploitation was defined as the utilization of somebody or something for one's own purpose. It was hypothesized that both the physical abilities and the "Indianness" of the native athlete were employed by the Anglo-entrepreneur for pecuniary gain and/or for promotional reasons, until such time as the "uniqueness" of the Indian no longer served as a drawcard, and his skills on the playing field were matched by those of his white opponents. It was further suggested that the Indian athlete entered this scenario voluntarily and sought to take from the arena as much as he gave.

Data, drawn from a number of North American and British newspapers, permitted an analysis of the type and extent of Indian involvement in lacrosse, both at home and abroad, from 1833 to the turn of the century.

It became apparent that throughout this time period race track proprietors and baseball organizations had endeavoured to promote their activities (and thus boost attendance and gate receipts) by hosting Indian lacrosse exhibitions on their premises, while private clubs and resorts had utilized the same resources to appease their patrons and advance their programmes and institutions. Caucasian lacrosse enthusiasts sought to promote "their" game by arranging for Indian demonstrations to be staged prior to, or during, important lacrosse tournaments; as a part of fund raising ventures; and in the presence of various dignitaries and members of Royalty. The inclusion of native teams on international tours was considered essential for publicity and financial reasons during the two decades following Confederation. And finally, the colourfulness of the native and the uniqueness of his game were deliberately used by individuals like W. G. Beers to promote the Dominion abroad and to foster nationalism at home. On another level were the Anglo-sponsored native troupes who travelled from community to community to participate in "Indian Festivals," or to stage "spectacular displays of traditional Indian activities and contests" for the enjoyment of the paying customer.

On the other side of the coin was the native athlete who, in return for services rendered, received remuneration in one form or another. While the amounts may not have been substantial, they undoubtedly found a welcome place in the native coffer. Further, the opportunity to earn money through lacrosse was probably considered a far more attractive proposition than attempting to extract it from the soil. Exhibition tours, whether regional or abroad, afforded a luxury otherwise beyond the reach of the average Indian. These trips, together with challenge matches at home, led to closer contact with certain elements of white society and if nothing else, at least earned the Indian the grudging respect of the white players who happened to oppose him.

Thus while there were obviously some short term pay-offs for the Indian, in the long haul it was the European who stood to gain the most from native involvement in lacrosse. The white man reaped, for as long as possible, whatever dividends he was able, by exploiting the skills of the Indian on the playing field and his sale-ability at the box-office. As time dulled the novelty of the gaudily painted-befeathered-whooping native player, and as his lacrosse talents were equalled or surpassed by his white opponents, the Indian was gradually shunted aside and his game taken over completely by the Caucasian.