

Runners of the Plains

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The Blackfoot, Cree and Saulteaux tribes of the Canadian plains all considered running an important part of their way of life. The signing of the numbered treaties, particularly Treaties 4, 5, 6, and 7, forced the numerous bands of these tribes onto reservations and initiated a process of education through industrial schools. The first three of these schools were put into operation in 1884. They were located at Qu'Appelle and Battleford in present day Saskatchewan and just outside of High River, Alberta. Two of the runners discussed, Paul Acoose, a Saulteaux, and Alex Decoteau, a Cree, attended industrial school and became a part of the acculturation process effected by these institutions.

Deerfoot and Bad Dried Meat, two Blackfoot runners, were of an earlier era just prior to the establishment of the schools and their running roles related more to the land, hunting and competing professionally in Calgary. Acoose and Decoteau competed in the white man's races. Both were outstanding with the younger, Alex Decoteau, going on to carry Canada's colors at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden. Both became respected members of their communities. Unfortunately, Decoteau was killed in action at Pachendale in 1917. Though famous among their people and the new white immigrants, as runners both Deerfoot and Bad Dried Meat are best remembered for their unfortunate conflicts with the authorities.

Deerfoot was a warrior and when supplies were scarce in 1888 he broke into the Hudson Bay Post in Calgary and made off with a small amount of blankets and rations. The N.W.M.P. attempted to detain him and he resisted arrest. He moved about the large Blackfoot region west of Calgary and eluded the Mounties until Crowfoot secured the services of J.A. Lougheed to defend the popular Deerfoot. The result of Deerfoot's trial, when he came into custody at Crowfoot's request, was six weeks jail term. This light sentence avoided a serious confrontation between the unhappy followers of Crowfoot and the federal authorities.

Earlier an incident involving Bad Dried Meat and a N.W.M.P. scout had placed the directors of Indian Affairs in a most embarrassing position. Bad Dried Meat had received the necessary pass to leave the Blackfoot Reservation and travel south to the Peigan Reserve southwest of Fort McLeod. While in transit the runner was mistaken for Deerfoot, who was being sought by the law, and when he misunderstood the N.W.M.P. scout's intention took cover. The scout, who had been given Bad Dried Meat's papers, shot and wounded the Blackfoot. The discovery of this mistake caused a near uprising of the total Blackfoot Confederacy. A large and unusually fast flurry of correspondence resulted in profound apologies going to Bad Dried Meat and the Blackfoot people. The famous runner also received compensation from the government, and fortunately, recovered from his hip wound.

The four runners discussed in this paper are being used as role models for their people. At Ben Calf Robe School in Edmonton pictures of Bad Dried Meat and Deerfoot are hung in a prominent location. On the Blackfoot Reserve Deerfoot's name has been used to name hockey teams, sport facilities and a successful track club. Similar recognition has been shown to Paul Acoose at the Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School. He has been elected into the Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame as has Alex Decoteau into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame. Alex Wuttunee Decoteau was also honoured at a special ceremony held at the Second Annual Red Pheasant Pow-Wow.

In summary,

We came, we destroyed;
We patronized, we may grow.
They withdrew, they died,
They suffered, they will grow.

The runners of the plains have presented a quality model for their people to follow.