

The Significance of Native ‘Sport’ History

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Native people live in North American society, even though they remain “invisible” to most of us. Their invisibility is certainly maintained in current sport history. Native people seem to have lost their significance in Canadian sport after the early 1900s. Their resettlement on reserves has removed them, not only from North American society, but also from our purview as historians. Little is recorded of the evolution of contemporary native culture-information on sports and games, when collected, has focused on the early period of contact with European colonists. Meanwhile, reports of native athletes within mainstream sport have remained selective and primarily anecdotal in nature.

Despite these limitations in the literature, significant trends emerge which warrant consideration. These trends provide insight on- the overt nature of sport, but also point to more subtle ethnocentric assumptions which historians may have adopted. Two types of native ‘sport’ history are examined: 1) the native athlete within *Euro-American* (or mainstream) sport, and 2) the evolution of sports and games within *native* culture. Evidence suggests that the native athlete within mainstream sport, and the accompanying historical record, have been marked by racism, exploitation and ethnocentric distortion. Meanwhile, the record being compiled on the evolution of sport within native culture warrants scrutiny in light of the doctrine of cultural relativism, and the fallible ‘melting pot’ theory of prolonged cultural interchange. Examples from current research in sport history are used to highlight these trends in the literature.

Further research in the area of native ‘sport’ history would be valuable for both sport historians, and for native people. Sport historians have much to gain as we correct and improve existing historical accounts by the inclusion of native people. We also can benefit from an examination of sports and games within native society. The history of sport deals with the evolution of sports and games as well as their role in culture. Thus, the examination of a variety of cultures is necessary, in order to attain a broader world view with regard to the evolution and role of play, games and sports. Finally, research in this area acknowledges our social responsibility to contribute to the fight against native oppression, ultimately assisting native people in their search for a more meaningful existence in present day society.