

The Role of Sport in Traditional Inuit society

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between sport and traditional Inuit life. Sport may be more than a reflection of a culture—it may be so entwined in the values of the society that it becomes part of the culture. Native culture can be likened to a chain fashioned in a circle. The links are family, religion, language, music and dance, and games and sport. None is more important

than the other. The common thread in each link is cooperation. Because of the harsh Arctic environment individuals and family groups often depend on the success of others. Thus, activities that contribute to the survival of the group are valued. Sport and games have developed to reflect social and physical skills needed to survive in the Arctic. Yet these sports are more than a reflection of Inuit culture—they are the culture. Sport and games of the Inuit permeate all aspects of life. Play allows Inuit to practice for “real world” situations without the fear of failure. Participants explore and resolve new social roles and unrest. Traditional sport prepares the Inuit for the hunt, thus, success in sport may ensure the survival of the whole. Play is a place where traditional Inuit exemplify their values, and test their physical and psychological limits.

The games we play here are different than those we play in high school. We are participants not competitors. Sure you want to win, but you want to win because you’ve challenged yourself, beat your own record, jumped higher or run faster than you did last time. Not because you want to be better than someone else or beat someone else’s record. You keep score inside yourself.

Greg Nothstine in Annabel Lund
Heartbeat.