

# The Noble Savage and the Sporting Image

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The image of the “noble savage” is an invented, Eurocentric one which exists today along with the image of the Indian athlete as a romanticized one. This essay attempted to show the relation of these two images, the noble savage and the Indian as natural athlete.

First, the assumptions behind the noble savage and ignoble savage were examined. The development of these two images was manipulated by the Europeans to fit their own needs. When the Europeans were disgusted with society they saw the Indians as simple, yet happy people who were models of the ideal society. This noble savage image later gave way to the more negative, uncivilized and barbaric image of the ignoble savage as the Europeans needed to justify moving the Indians off their homelands as the Europeans pushed westward across what would later become the United States.

Second, this paper examined the development of the image of the Indian as athlete using accounts beginning with early European settlers and ending with early twentieth century accounts. This image of the Indian as natural athlete was constructed mainly on a misunderstanding by the Europeans of the place of sport in Indian culture.

Third, the relationship between the images of the noble savage and the Indian as natural athlete was explored. This relationship is very important as some of the strongest recurring ethnographic images of Native Americans are that they were savages, natural athletes, and preoccupied with sport.

Indian culture is often discussed as a “generic whole” and it should be noted that there were many varied and diffuse cultures, each with their own specific identity. Unfortunately, most of the images of Native Americans that exist today, including those of the noble savage and natural athlete, are based on the “generic whole” perceptions of Indian culture.