

“Americanizing” Native Americans: Sports and the Acculturation of the Eastern Band of Cherokees

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Recent scholarship has focused on the acculturative aspects of sports during the Progressive Era (ca. 1900-1920). Progressive reformers believed that sports and organized playground activities would help “Americanize” the swelling flood of immigrants arriving in the United States. Immigrant children, in particular, were targets for assimilationists who assumed that learning the mysteries of team-oriented sports like baseball would help the newcomers learn about American society and the

necessity of cooperative effort. Not surprisingly, officials within the Bureau of Indian Affairs also believed that mainstream sports like baseball and football would work their magic among native American youth. The irony of “Americanizing” America’s native peoples went unnoticed. This paper is a case study of sports as an agent of acculturation among one group of Indians, the Eastern Band of Cherokees, who live in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Unlike the larger Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokees avoided removal to the West over the Trail of Tears in the 1830s. By the turn of the twentieth century it was a federally-recognized tribe occupying a well-defined reservation and having about 1,400 enrolled members. Federal agents on the reservation fostered a systematic program of acculturation that featured education, regimentation, and socialization at the tribal boarding school; included in this was an attempt to inculcate in Cherokee youth a love of mainstream sports. For some Cherokees this emphasis on sports intensified as they matriculated at off-reservation boarding schools like Carlisle Institute in Pennsylvania, where they played with Jim Thorpe on the famous Carlisle football teams.

At the same time, however, there were certain factors promoting the survival of traditional Cherokee sports, especially the ballplay (or stickball), which was similar to today’s lacrosse. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was actively encouraging the Eastern Cherokees to develop a tourist economy in the early twentieth century, and the ballplay was certain to attract white visitors. Thus federal agents found themselves in a paradoxical situation: encouraging mainstream sports as a means of acculturation and yet sponsoring traditional Indian sports to generate tourist dollars and attract public attention. Tourism became the dominant economic activity on the reservation and presently brings millions of visitors a year on their way to the nearby Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Though the ballplay continues, it is mostly an adjunct of tourism and long ago lost most of its ritualistic and symbolic significance. Today most Cherokees direct their passion and competitiveness to sports like football and baseball. Indeed, mainstream sports are one of the chief mechanisms by which modern Cherokees interact with their non-Indian neighbors.