

ETHNICITY AND RACE

Conquest on the Playing Field: Sports at Federally Operated Indian Boarding Schools

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During the turn of the century, the Carlisle Indian School from Carlisle, Pennsylvania sponsored one of the most successful interscholastic athletic programs in the nation. Its football teams competed and won against the top college teams at the time, and its athletic programs produced sports heroes recognized around the nation and the world such as Jim Thorpe, Major League Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher Charles Albert "Chief" Bender, and Olympic distance runner Louis Tewanami. While the athletic achievements of native Americans at Federally sponsored Indian schools nationwide have been widely heralded, the schools themselves were founded upon a principle of conquest. Indian schools ultimately aimed to have Native people forget and devalue their won cultures and histories, and accept western language and ways

Schools during the turn of the century operated as ritual forms that promoted the assimilation of Native Americans to Anglo-Protestant cultural norms and capitalist social relations.

This paper examines sports at the Carlisle Indian School and some of the many other schools opened and operated by the United States Department of Interior beginning in the late 19th century. I draw from a wide range of primary documents, including school catalogues, letters from coaches, annual reports, newspaper articles, and correspondence from school administrators. In addition, I use diaries and letters from Native Americans themselves who remembered even participated in sports programs at some of these schools.

Sports were not necessarily foreign to the lives of many Native Americans. Within tribal customs, however, sports were usually associated with religious rituals. At Indian schools, sports became secular rituals infused with lessons about obedience to corporate and military authority, progressive notions of time, Protestant self-denial, individual achievement and capitalist competition. This paper does not examine Indian school sports as benign vehicles for Indian self-expression. Rather, it investigates how sports were important, complex, and problematic ritual forms which supported principles of assimilation and cultural conquest.