

## **Joe Keeper: Runner of the Northwest**

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The scene was set on a sunny day in Stockholm, Sweden for the outstanding Cree athlete, Joe Keeper, to run and to accomplish one of his more memorable feats. The race, he ran the 1912 10,000 meter Olympic final was a bellwether for modern distance running. The first four finishers were two North American Native and two Finnish runners. Little known and by far the least lionized by the North American and European press was Joe Keeper from Walker Lake located north of the shores of Lake Winnipeg in Canada's north west. Joe would place fourth in the 10,000 meter behind Finland's legendary Hannes Kolehmainen and the great Hopi runner Louis Tewanima. Keeper's finish is the best result any Canadian has achieved in the 10,000 meter event in the Olympics.

His personal story is a part of the growing collection of historical data supporting the concept that athletes of aboriginal ancestry played an important role in the burgeoning world of twentieth century sport. The biographies of these first nations performers traverse two cultures.

Joseph B. Keeper was born on January 17, 1886 at Walker Lake. This area was the winter hunting and trapping area for the Keeper family, of the Norway House Cree Band. Norway House had been the major fur distribution centre, for the Athabasca brigades following the coalition of the North West and Hudson Bay Companies in 1821. As the trade moved further into the Canadian northwest the import of this trading centre grew. This trading area had also been strongly influenced by the charismatic Wesleyan minister James Evans. These trading and missionary influences were to bring changes to the culture of the Cree. One family so touched by these Christianizing and economic powers, was that of Walker Keeper, Joe's father. His grandfather, Isaac Keeper had been baptized into the Methodist fold in 1856. Joe the youngest of ten children would be the only member of Walker's family to attend school.

Following the North West rebellion of 1885 a number of new industrial schools were constructed by the Department of Indian Affairs for the education of the aboriginal youth of western Canada. The department's 1891 report stated there were 1,045 pupils enrolled in nineteen industrial schools. The Methodist Church was responsible for the education of the aboriginal youth in two of these new educational centres located at Red Deer and Brandon. In 1899 Joseph Keeper made his way south to attend the Brandon Industrial School and began a new chapter in his adaptation to the quickly shifting world of the Canadian prairies.

This study views Joe Keeper's life and the effects that educational, spiritual, military, economic and sporting forces had upon this outstanding athlete. The result of these forces acting in diverse geographical settings allowed him to acquire over a lifetime a perception of living which included two world views. A second focus of this biographical study is an examination of how the body becomes a metaphor for individual and social change. The Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan and Manitoba provided background information for this investigation. The Manitoba Archives and Sports Hall of Fame were an important source of information and photographs. Joe Keeper was inducted into the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame in 1984. Personal interviews with friends and family, particularly spoken and written information from his son, Joe Keeper Jr. were key sources of data essential for the telling of this aboriginal athlete's story.