

Aboriginal Sport Revisited: Race, Class and Gender Relations

Vichy Paraschak
University of Windsor, Ont.

Researchers examining aboriginal sport have usually assumed that aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples form two distinct social groups based solely on race.

However, sport is a social practice which structures, and is structured by various power relations. This paper reexamines existing accounts of aboriginal involvement in sport, and critiques the history of Aboriginal sport by extending our analysis to include race, class and gender relations.

Difficulties arise as soon as concepts such as “class” and “race” are used. For example, “race” can be defined in terms of government definitions, individuals identification, visual characteristics, or some combination of the above. This paper discusses some of the limitations of these concepts, and examines accounts on aboriginal sport, identifying explicit and implicit assumptions concerning race, class and gender. It is contextualized within the literature dealing with sport more generally. This analysis offers a sense of the diversity of aboriginal peoples’ experiences in sport. As well, it shows that while some experiences of Aboriginal athletes have been akin to other athletes, government, educational and sporting institutions have also at times treated them more harshly, or with special privileges, specifically because of their aboriginal status.

This type of analysis is needed in sport history for several reasons. We need to depict sport as human behaviour which occurs within a broader context of social relations. We also need to examine the ways in which sport, as an institution, reproduces unequal power relations. Existing historical accounts outline how race, or gender, or class has shaped sporting opportunities. We need, however, to acknowledge that these characteristics form interconnected, constructed identities which together provide the framework for the differential privileging, or the exclusion of individuals in sport. Once this is done, we will be able to more clearly see the common linkages which exist between groups in sport, as well as appreciate unique challenges faced by some groups in their quest for sporting opportunities.