

Playground Fenced and Now in Use: Subarctic Canadian Native Peoples and the Sports of the Mission Schools

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Anglican missionary work in subarctic north-western Canada commenced in the 1860s. A mission school, established at Hay River on the south shore of Great Slave Lake in 1898, accelerated the processes of acculturation which were a stated aspect of the missionary program of intervention. The heavy emphasis on religious education at the mission school was complemented by a rigid program of physical drills, physical education and sports. The regimentation of time and space produced through this program was unfamiliar to the children of hunter-gatherers who were traditionally educated in accordance with the tenets of a profoundly different educational philosophy. The values inculcated through the missionary program differed radically from the traditional ethos, and they were distinctly expressed through the annual 'Sports Day.' During the 'Sports Day' the Native peoples were for the first time introduced to the performance principle of modern sports. This principle stood in marked contrast to the dominant cooperative dispositions actualized in the field of traditional games.

Regarding sport, the most important result of the mission school episode for the Native peoples was in their developing of an incipient understanding and acceptance of the performance principle. Today the penetration of modern sport practices into even the remotest northern communities constrains significantly the revitalization of the traditional form.

This analysis is based upon mission school yearbooks; the private journals and letter books kept by the principals; and reminiscences by Native old-timers who had been sent to the school during the 1920s and 1930s.