

Paving the Way to Respect: The National Aboriginal Sport Foundation, 1969-1978

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Colin Tatz has argued that "sport has paved the way for Aborigines [the indigenous peoples of Australia] to gain the respect of white Australia." Australian-Aboriginal societal relations have played an integral role in the lives of those Aboriginal athletes and organizers who have been "paving the way for Australian respect." The unequal power relations between Aborigines and non-aboriginal

Australians, as well as between various Aboriginal groups, have contextualized possibilities for aboriginal sports people whether they were involved in all-aboriginal sport (such as national carnivals and international tours), or in mainstream sports where Aboriginal athletes remain largely on the periphery.

A national Aboriginal sport program has existed in Australia since 1969. This paper focuses on the initial years (1969 to 1978) of the National Aboriginal Sport Foundation (NASF), and particularly on the contributions of the 12-member advisory council of elite Aboriginal athletes linked to this program. Program files archived within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and interviews with various individuals involved in this program, are used for this account.

Although the NASF members were initially selected because of their success on the sporting fields of Australia, they attempted during this time to address the needs of Aboriginal athletes as best they could. Many of the decisions they made reflected the male elite, mainstream sport background of most of the NASF members. All of the funding went towards mainstream sporting events, with most of it benefitting young male athletes, and much of it directed towards elite mainstream competitions and tours.

At a time when broader conflicts were occurring between Aboriginal activists and non-aboriginal Australians in society, this program continued to receive federal government support. It seems possible, in fact, that the activities funded through this program may have been supported by the government precisely because they reproduced, rather than challenged, existing race relations. Nevertheless, members of the NASF were able to increase opportunities for Aboriginal involvement in sport - including many all-Aboriginal opportunities - as long as they continued to promote the rationale that Aborigines could be integrated into Australian society through sport. Looking back over this era, Aboriginal athletes and organizers were clearly paving the way for Aborigines to gain the respect of white Australia - but they were also, slowly, beginning to create a path which reflected their own particular vision of sport.