

NATIVE PEOPLES

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Anglicizing Indians Through the Old Indian Game: Lacrosse at the Carlisle School, 1910-1918

This paper examines how and why officials at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School replaced the varsity baseball program with the elite, gentlemanly modern sport of lacrosse. During the early twentieth century, the Carlisle school attempted to accomplish its goals of the ‘civilization’ of Native students by teaching them the virtues of respectable modern sports. However, when some students chose to emulate white athletes by engaging in professional summer baseball, school officials eliminated the baseball team, allegedly to protect Indians from the economic vices of white society. When Carlisle found itself under attack from proponents of the national pastime, athletic director Glenn “Pop” Warner deflected criticism by pointing to the lack of character exhibited by his students. Ironically, the school’s decision to replace baseball with lacrosse highlighted the contradictory mission of the school. In fact, while the school wanted to assimilate Indians to white culture, it would not permit them to join the world of the commercial marketplace. By replacing the national pastime with the gentlemanly game of lacrosse, Indians would allegedly learn to become respectable citizens, following the lead of aristocratic whites, rather than commercial and working-class interests.

Although a few Iroquoian Indians brought their own lacrosse experiences with them to the Carlisle program, most of the Native athletes on the team came from ‘western’ nations which had distinct stick and ball game traditions. The group of primarily western American Indians coached by an Irish-Canadian playing a modernized version of the old Iroquoian ball game therefore faced significant culture-mixing. Carrying much of their own cultural baggage and coming from their particular tribal heritage of ball-playing, these Native Americans learned a form of Iroquoian culture that had been re-packaged and re-conceptualized by gentlemen sportsmen.

The paper interrogates the role of sport, and especially elite sport, in acculturating subordinate peoples. More importantly, it highlights the irony of using a modernized version of a traditional Native cultural form to accomplish the acculturation of Indians to the standards of elite, Protestant America. The paper also highlights some early tensions between the democratic, integrative, and commercial values of baseball and the aristocratic, elite and amateur values of lacrosse.