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Mission Impossible: The Barriers to Developing Sport and Recreation Programs in Ontario's First Nations Communities

In June 1991, the Chiefs of Ontario gathered at Six Nations of the Grand River to discuss Aboriginal issues—among them, the development of sport and recreation. At the conference, the Chiefs passed Resolution #11, a promise to begin the process of addressing the inadequacies and, to some extent the non-existence, of sport and recreation programs and facilities within Ontario's First Nations communities. This was intimately tied to a growing concern for the health and welfare of their people. Five months after the June conference, the Ontario Aboriginal Recreation Circle (OARC) was officially established as a means to improve the quality of life for all Aboriginal people in Ontario.

Yet, OARC was not the first Aboriginal sport and recreation program in Ontario. Through the 1950s and 1960s Aboriginal rights were at the forefront of Canadian politics. One of the primary issues that Aboriginal leaders constantly addressed focused on the hopelessly oppressive conditions overwhelming many of their communities. In Ontario, some Aboriginal leaders believed that sport and recreation were viable solutions for helping to ease social ills. In the 1970s Health and Welfare Canada provided funding to help establish the province's first Aboriginal sport and recreation program, namely the Ontario Indian Sports Council (OISC). The OISC, however, was relatively short-lived. Widespread resistance to the development of sport and recreation programs in First Nations communities, combined with a lack of financial resources, ultimately led to the council's collapse in the early 1980s.

Nearly ten years of complete inactivity with respect to sport and recreation in Ontario's First Nations communities followed. And though OARC has sparked people's interest in sport and recreation, the initiative remains highly vulnerable to the same sort of barriers that plagued the OISC. To this date, OARC's mandate to improve the quality of life for all Aboriginal people in Ontario has proved to be a mission impossible. Despite OARC's efforts, many of Ontario's Aboriginal people do not participate in sport because of the social, political, and economic barriers that severely limit their activities.

This paper examines these barriers and argues that the OARC is no more stable, or effective, than was its predecessor, the OISC. Using letters and correspondence, minutes of meetings, discussion papers and reports, the paper expands on the small body of knowledge that exists about Aboriginal sport history in twentieth-century Ontario.