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Fin de Siècle Native Sport: **The ‘Traditions’ Continue**

The search for ‘traditional’ native sport forms in North America has most often sent researchers back to the early days of European-native contact, when the first written accounts of native-derived sport practices were recorded. Researchers exploring the Northern Games, Dene Games, powwows, snowsnake and the like have largely continued in this tradition, examining contemporary physical cultural contests involving native-derived activities. As we come to the end of the twentieth century, I feel it is relevant to revisit our conceptions of traditional native sport. I provide a historical account of contemporary, native-centered sport possibilities in order to address a variety of theoretical questions. These include: the sport forms that have been privileged as ‘traditional; our naturalized use of the term ‘traditional’; the idea of activities being ‘native-derived’; the processes by which activities have been fostered as ‘traditional’; and those cultural practices constructed and reproduced by native peoples that would typically fall outside of such a categorization.

This account includes a variety of activities under the control of native organizers, such as the North American Indigenous Games, the National Indian Activities Association, the Aboriginal Sport Circle, powwows, Northern Games, Dene Games, sled dog races, snowsnake and stick game competitions. Some of these events focus around ‘traditional’ native sports and others around ‘mainstream’ sports. But in fact all of these activities involve elements of both ‘nativeness’ and of anglo-americanism. Histories of these activities based on written records, interviews and secondary sources are presented. I argue that our interest in native peoples as ‘the Other’ leads us to focus more so on their being ‘different’, that is to say, how their practices differ from those of anglo-americans. Native involvement

in mainstream activities is configured as an assimilative practice, regardless of the values they bring to that activity. Thus we assume that native participants operating according to the “performance principle” in arctic sports are playing ‘traditional’ games, while native participants engaged in softball, using cooperative values, are considered to be playing ‘mainstream’ sports.

While the performance principle holds a prominent place in native sporting traditions today, elements of residual practices are still evident in some events and some participants. In this way, the sports of native peoples align with sports generally because their cultural practices follow the same processes; however, the labels attached to their sports (such as ‘traditional’) promote different understandings.

This paper challenges historians to reflect on the ways in which we have historicized native peoples, and the language we have used to understand native sporting practices. It also looks at the ways that labels such as ‘traditional’ have been taken on and reproduced by governments and native peoples through particular processes. Finally, it points to the complexity surrounding sport as a cultural practice—in the end: Who owns it? Who appropriates it? Who has a right to it?



Myrtis shows off her philatelic exhibit.