

Janice Forsyth

## *Native to Native:* **Canadian Assimilation Policy and the Emergence of Indigenous Games**

Since the colonial period of British North America, government officials have used the twin policies of assimilation and diminution of Indigenous values and culture to control every aspect of Indigenous life, including their sport practices. These policies have had far-reaching consequences for Native culture in the twentieth century. In the 1970s this pattern of discrimination was further demonstrated through the Native Sport and Recreation Program. With federal funding beginning in 1972, Indigenous leaders across Canada fashioned a successful, segregated, All-Indian sport system from the mainstream sport model. This ran counter to the assimilative views of federal officials who saw the program as a way to assimilate Indigenous athletes into the larger Canadian sport system. When, the Indigenous leaders met the Minister of State, Iona Campagnolo in the winter months of 1978 they expected to negotiate on the future of Indigenous sport. Instead they were given an ultimatum — assimilate their programs with those of Fitness and Amateur Sport or forever remain on the fringe of competitive sport in Canada. They chose not to assimilate. By 1981, federal funding for the Native Sport and Recreation Program had altogether ceased and with it most of the activities fostered during the program's existence.

The 1978 meeting with Minister Campagnolo was a pivotal event in Native sport history. Not only did it spell the end of an era of federal control over Native sport, more significantly, Campagnolo's words inadvertently strengthened the resolve of the Indigenous delegates to pursue their own particular vision of sport in Canada. This collective vision for sport was the initiative of one man, J. Wilton Littlechild, an Indigenous lawyer from Hobbema, Alberta. In 1988, Littlechild began organizing the first North American Indigenous Games, an Olympic-style sport competition and cultural extravaganza exclusively for the Indigenous people of Canada and the United States. More than 2000 athletes participated in the first Games held in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1990. Since that time, there have been three more Games, each attracting a record number of participants.

Using letters and correspondence from the personal files of J. Wilton Littlechild, minutes of meetings, government proposals and reports, this paper examines in breadth and depth how the demise of the Native Sport and Recreation Programs served as the catalyst for Wilton Littlechild's North American Indigenous Games. Though Littlechild had actively sought federal involvement in Indigenous sport through the 1970s, by the late 1980s he was determined to create a system of sport that was suited entirely to meet

the needs of Indigenous people. “Native to Native we will participate and compete in our traditional ways and in new contemporary ways adopted from other Olympic-style events,” he asserted. “We’ll challenge our own individual skills, see what we are made of, and capture our spirits”.

The Indigenous Games are no simple reminder of the Native Sport and Recreation Program. Not only do they promote Indigenous distinctiveness through self-determined sport and cultural activities, but they also pose a serious challenge to federal officials to accept the Games as a legitimate form of national and international competition. The evolution of sport from the Native Sport and Recreation Program to the creation of the Indigenous Games demonstrates how Indigenous people have dealt with oppressive legislation to create a distinct and powerful sport system that affirms their identity and culture.