

# **ABORIGINAL SPORT HISTORY**

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## **The Double Helix: Constructing Opportunities in Aboriginal Sport**

Throughout the 1990s, Aboriginal people worked diligently to bring the major issues concerning Aboriginal sport and recreation to the attention of both government and the mainstream sport system. The result of their efforts is the re-emergence of the all-Aboriginal sport system, which flourished in the 1970s until federal funding for Aboriginal sport programs were cut in 1981. Drawing largely from primary source documents from the office of the Aboriginal Sport Circle, the national body for Aboriginal sport in Canada, this paper examines how Aboriginal people have selected points of integration into the mainstream to further their particular vision of sport and culture, and in doing so, have created a meaningful space for themselves within the Canadian sport system. The holistic focus of the National Aboriginal High Performance Camps, the highly visible expression of nationalism through Team Indigenous, and the incorporation of issues important to Aboriginal people into an Aboriginal Coaching Manual illustrate this point. Each program is examined in turn. The questions considered here are: What is the underlying rationale for the program? How is it connected to the mainstream, and how is it distinct?

The revitalization and expansion of the Aboriginal sport system reflects a growing understanding within the federal government that there is a cultural basis to sport. The transfer of responsibility for sport from the Department of Health and Welfare to Canadian Heritage in 1993 highlights this change as it reflects how sport is inextricably linked to constructing a shared Canadian culture and identity. Federal funding for Aboriginal sport initiatives suggests that the federal government views Aboriginal people as an important part of the Canadian mosaic that Aboriginal expressions of cultural distinctiveness through sport can enhance, rather than detract, from that image.

By emphasizing the cultural in contemporary Aboriginal sport practices in Canada, this paper furthers our understanding of

the ways Aboriginal people have created meaningful spaces for themselves within the dominant sport model and how sport can be an empowering tool when constructed from an Aboriginal framework. As well, by focusing on the historical present, this paper contributes to our understanding of living cultures and the various ways Aboriginal people are attempting to revive their spiritual and philosophical traditions in sport to create something truly distinctive from the mainstream sport model.

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