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“Get into the Mainstream”: Aboriginal Sport in Canada, 1970 to 2000

Aboriginal sport in Canada seems to have come of age in the last decade of the twentieth century. The Aboriginal Sport Circle, created in 1995, serves as the national organization for aboriginal sport, with funding from Sport Canada and members from provincial/territorial aboriginal sport organizations across the country. The North American Indigenous Games have become institutionalized since their inception in 1990, with the fifth Games planned for Winnipeg in 2002. Provincial/territorial ministers of sport have placed aboriginal sport on their agenda, even sponsoring a national roundtable last spring that resulted in the Maskwachees Declaration on Aboriginal Sport in Canada. The legitimacy sought by native organizers has finally been realized – or has it?

Aboriginal sport went through a similar “golden age” during the 1970s. A Native Sport and Recreation Program received funding from the federal government between 1972 and 1981. A National Indian Sports Council was created, with provincial/territorial representatives from across the country. The

Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sport offered to support them as a national sport organization in 1978. Her request – that they “get into the mainstream and compete like everyone else” – was, however, soundly rejected. Aboriginal delegates instead stressed their interest in a view of sport informed by broader native concerns. They argued for a link with the National Indian Brotherhood rather than the National Sport and Recreation Center. Aboriginal organizers maintained their own vision for sport, but lost their federal funding within a few years. They subsequently faced a bleak future, in terms of government support, until they regained legitimacy in the 1990s.

This paper looks at the continuity and change in approaches taken towards native sport in Canada since the 1970s. Federal government files and reports on the Native Sport and Recreation Program, and documents addressing aboriginal sport throughout the 1990s have been used to compare and contrast these two federally funded programs. These programs are then contextualized within broader policy developments in Sport Canada and changing government-aboriginal relations, in order to identify the context within which aboriginal sport has developed over the last thirty years – what aboriginal leaders set out to do initially, and the degree of success they have achieved in carving out a view of sport informed by broader native concerns.

The federal government’s rationale for aboriginal sport has remained consistent – their hope is to prepare native peoples for success in mainstream sporting opportunities. The process they have used to work towards this rationale has, however, shifted. Aboriginal sport organizations have likewise remained consistent in their rationale. They wish to create a system more in keeping with aboriginal values, as seen by the recent creation of coaching units on racism, holistic and traditional teachings, and nutrition (including traditional foods). They are fostering all-native teams and competitions that remain under aboriginal control and represent aboriginal peoples in their preferred manner. However, they have failed to obtain consensus on some fundamental issues; for example, should they be organized by nation or by province/territory? How can native values be incorporated into elite sport opportunities? What activities (i.e., traditional or mainstream) should be promoted by their organizations? These and other contentious questions are discussed to demonstrate the

difficulties faced by native activists as they try to carve out a unique approach towards sport within a set of structures which some have termed a global sport monoculture.

This paper contributes towards sport history by documenting the ongoing development of aboriginal sport in Canada within a broader socio-political context. The processes underlying attempts by native organizers to establish their legitimacy and obtain resources is one faced by many marginalized groups within Canada. However, aboriginal sport is unique in its form, which offers perhaps the most Canadian of all sporting activities – traditional native sports. It is also unique in function, as it provides native Canadians with their own symbolic national “native” accomplishments, and continues to be used to make the case that aboriginal peoples, as a separate nation, are deserving of sport opportunities that let them express their nationhood to the world.



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