

INDIGENOUS SPORT

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Tee-Pees and Tomahawks: Aboriginal Cultural Representation at the 1976 Olympic Games

The 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Quebec are often remembered by sport historians for the massive politics and corruption that characterized the staging of this event. Boycotts, labor disputes, power struggles, and escalating costs were some of the major issues dealt with by Olympic organizers. In light of these massive struggles, little scholarly attention has been paid to the struggles taking place in other areas of the Games, specifically the Closing Ceremonies, where local Aboriginal people were invited to participate in a cultural celebration that was constructed for them by non-Aboriginal organizers.

Despite the complete lack of Aboriginal involvement in the organizational process, approximately 300 local Aboriginal people participated in the celebration, having consented to share center stage with approximately 200 non-Aboriginal people dressed and painted to look like Indians. To contrast the images of Aboriginal people being promoted at the international level, Mohawks from Kahnawake, Quebec, invited Olympic spectators to Kahnawake to experience local Aboriginal community life and culture as lived by the Mohawks in that region.

This paper will examine the historical events surrounding the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the Closing Ceremonies of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Quebec, and explore the images constructed by the Olympic organizers as well as by the Mohawks themselves. These events will be examined within the social, political, and economic context of both Aboriginal and mainstream society, and will be situated historically. This paper will show how Olympic organizers appropriated Aboriginal images to promote the idea of a multi-cultural Canada, and how Aboriginal people largely acquiesced to this international spectacle to promote their own images as reflected through their "Indian Days" celebration. As such, this paper will address a number of important questions dealing with issues of race, ethnicity, class, and culture in late twentieth century Canadian society.
