

ABORIGINAL SPORT

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Pretty Near a War Again, Pretty Near a War!: Intercultural Sporting Events at Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Arctic Trading Posts

The aboriginal cultures of Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories underwent far-reaching changes subsequent to the arrival of missionaries, explorers, and fur traders between 1740 and 1880. Progressing from west to east in Alaska after 1740 and from south to north in western Arctic Canada after 1840, the mercantile frontier economy of the fur trade gradually integrated the diverse regional aboriginal societies into extensive trading networks. By virtue of their mutual involvement in the trading activities, aboriginal cultures that for centuries had survived within more or less autonomous small-scale kinship networks, had to redefine regional positions and alliances within the larger scale of the expanding fur trade networks.

Aboriginal groups assembling at the trading establishments for the seasonal trade gatherings often looked back on long local and regional histories of mutual distrust, enmity, and sometimes outright warfare. As often as not, the trade gatherings would necessitate the establishment of at least temporarily conflict-free relations for the duration of the proceedings. Fur traders and aboriginal trade partners soon came to realize that at least part of the old hostilities could safely be channeled into the staging of traditional games, and later, Euro-Canadian sports. The outcome of the sports competitions that soon came to be an integral part of the proceedings hence was often contested with considerable vigor. This paper examines the position of traditional games and Euro-Canadian sports in these processes. Specific reference will be made to the northern Yukon and to the Mackenzie Delta region of the Canadian Northwest Territories.