

# The *Indian Act* and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This paper examines how the *Indian Act* shaped the types of sporting opportunities that were made available for Aboriginal people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Indian Act* was (and still is) a significant piece of legislation in terms of Aboriginal sport history in that it structured the possibilities for Aboriginal participation in sport in Canada and legitimized Euro-Canadian ways of playing as the most appropriate forms of play.

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## ***The Indian Act and the (Re)Shaping of Canadian Aboriginal Sport Practices***

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines how the Indian Act shaped the types of sporting opportunities that were made available for Aboriginal people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Indian Act was (and still is) a significant piece of legislation in terms of Aboriginal sport history in that it structured the possibilities for Aboriginal participation in sport in Canada and legitimized Euro-Canadian ways of playing as the most appropriate forms of play.*

### **Résumé**

*Ce document examine la manière dont la Loi sur les Indiens a façonné les genres d'activités sportives que pouvaient pratiquer les Autochtones de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle au milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. La Loi sur les Indiens était (et est toujours) un texte législatif important sur le plan de l'histoire des sports autochtones, car elle a structuré les possibilités pour les Autochtones de pratiquer des sports au Canada et elle a légitimé les façons de jouer euro-canadiennes comme étant les formes de jeu les plus appropriées.*

### **Introduction**

In his treatise on Indigenous self-government, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (1999) critiques the Western notion of power that aims to regulate, dominate, and control. Drawing on the work of French theorist, Michel Foucault, Alfred contends that state power is extended through constitutional frameworks that claim to define the relationship between the state and its citizens, even when the citizens are not part of the decision-making processes. Alfred sees this extension of state power through legislative means as evidence of a coercive relationship. For Aboriginal people, this coercion is even more pronounced as the federal government, supported by a majority of voters, has claimed the power to define how Aboriginal people should participate in Canadian society. On this subject, Alfred writes:

A critique of state power that sees oppression as an inevitable function of the state, even when it is constrained by a constitutionally defined social-political contract, should have special resonance for indigenous people, since their nations were never party to any contract and yet have been forced to operate within a framework that presupposes the legitimacy of state sovereignty over them. Arguing for rights within that framework only reinforces the state's anti-historic claim to sovereignty by contract. (48)

According to Alfred, it is not possible for Aboriginal people to argue for legitimacy within a framework that they did not construct because that framework was not established to privilege or protect Aboriginal ways of living and viewing the social world but to maintain the power and authority of its non-Aboriginal creators.

Alfred's (1999) critique has merit. In 1876, the Government of Canada created the *Indian Act*. Historically, the *Indian Act* was established to protect Aboriginal lands from the encroachment of non-Aboriginal settlers and to establish Aboriginal autonomy from the developing society, but soon came to be interpreted by policy-makers as an instrument to control almost every aspect of Aboriginal life. Unlike the treaties, Aboriginal people did not formally approve this piece of legislation. No agreements were signed. No verbal promises were made. In short, it was drafted by federal bureaucrats in Ottawa who took responsibility for defining the Government's relationship with Aboriginal people, who were positioned as wards of the state (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 2000). With this type of bureaucratic power, federal officials asserted the right to regulate Aboriginal lives and restrict their access to resources that could be used to develop their human and financial potential. More than one hundred and thirty years later, the *Indian Act* continues to regulate Aboriginal lives from the "cradle to the grave" in spite of Aboriginal efforts for self-determination (Mecredi and Turpel 1993, 81).

In this paper, I examine the relationship between federal policies directed at Aboriginal people, the major institutions that took responsibility for implementing these strategies, and the shaping and reshaping of Aboriginal sport practices in Canada. More specifically, this paper focuses on how the *Indian Act* shaped the types of sporting opportunities that were made available for Aboriginal people in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The developments that took place during this era, including the repression of traditional Aboriginal practices and residential schooling, are examined and, together, they demonstrate how federal authorities, working in conjunction with various religious groups, relied on Euro-Canadian sports and games to help them achieve their assimilative goals.

### **The *Indian Act***

For many people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the *Indian Act* has come to symbolize the paternalism embedded in government policy-making. In the past, Aboriginal people were rarely consulted on how to improve their lives through government policies, and when their opinions were sought, their recommendations were almost never taken seriously. In her study on the development of the 1969 White Paper, Sally Weaver (1981) shows how this paternalism continued apace within the federal government well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Indian Affairs hosted a series of consultations with Aboriginal leaders throughout the country to gather their input on how to revise the *Indian Act*, when the White Paper was released it was obvious Aboriginal concerns had been ignored in favour of federal objectives. Rather than revise the *Indian Act*, the federal government proposed to abolish its historical relationship with Aboriginal people by transferring responsibility to the provinces. As Aboriginal leaders have often pointed out, the solution is not to abolish the *Indian Act*, but to revise it with Aboriginal input leading the way (e.g., Cardinal 1969). Understandably, many Aboriginal people have expressed their dismay with the federal government. Even the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* describes the relationship as a “dialogue of the deaf” characterized by “vast differences in philosophy, perspective and aspirations” between federal policy-makers and Aboriginal leaders (Canada 1996, 257).

Aboriginal authors have also criticized the enormous power wielded by the federal government through the *Indian Act*. Thomas King (2003), for example, calls attention to the irony of a Canadian nationalism that boasts of fair treatment for Aboriginal people by contrasting its history of bureaucratic management with American efforts to exterminate them. To be sure, the Government of Canada has endorsed physical violence, mainly in instances where Aboriginal people have asserted their rights, or when they are protecting their lands from corporatist takeover (e.g., Edwards 2001; Goodleaf 1995). However, south of the border, in the United States, it was far more common for militiamen to shoot or imprison Aboriginal people if they impeded American settlement in any way. The connection between Canadian and American practices has not escaped Aboriginal critiques, as King (2003) wryly implies, “No need to send in the cavalry with guns blazing. Legislation will do just as nicely” (143). The process of colonization, whether enacted through legislation or sheer force, has always been a violent one and, in spite of Aboriginal resistance, persists in Canada (Neu and Therrien 2003).

The present challenge for Aboriginal people is to maintain their distinct ways of life within a social system that has historically been hostile towards Aboriginal practices. Some scholars have even called into question

the likelihood of peaceful coexistence, arguing that it is not possible for two different cultures to flourish in a system that was designed to support one way of life and not another (e.g., Denis 1997). In this struggle for power, policies and legislation are much more than discursive constructs, they are concrete manifestations of a rational way of thinking about a particular way of life. The abstract concepts embedded in these bureaucratic statements thus receive their fullest expression when they are implemented by the people who have been employed to carry them out.

In terms of Aboriginal assimilation, the state could not achieve its goals without the assistance of various Christian denominations, whose missionaries came with their bibles and their beliefs in competition for new souls in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their assumptions about Western cultural and religious superiority influenced the way they saw and understood Aboriginal ways of life and helped to legitimate colonial authority over Aboriginal affairs (e.g. Pettipas 1994; Titley 1986). To the missionaries, Aboriginal people were uncivilized and in need of moral and spiritual guidance. Even Aboriginal opposition to their authority was interpreted as childish hedonism and reinforced religious beliefs that their work was an act of benevolence that Aboriginal people would one day learn to appreciate (e.g. Furniss 1992). Missionaries did not always question their assumptions, but accepted the evolving Euro-Canadian Christian way of life as natural and right, and worked in conjunction with government authorities to maintain their control over Aboriginal people. One of the ways in which church and state extended their power over Aboriginal lives was through the regulation of traditional beliefs and practices, a mode of control that had a far-reaching impact on how Aboriginal people came to participate in the developing structure of Euro-Canadian sports and games in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Cultural Regulation**

Beginning in 1885, the federal government implemented a series of amendments to the *Indian Act* to put an end to Aboriginal religious ceremonies because they were thought to be incompatible with Euro-Canadian Christian life. There was a widespread belief among government and church officials that, as long as Aboriginal religious systems remained intact, Aboriginal people would never realize the spiritual benefits of Christianity or learn how to engage in productive labour. Armed with documents that were conceived in private, and which justified their actions, church and state attempted to replace traditional practices, like the Potlatch and Sundance ceremonies, with activities that were seemingly secular but were imbued with Christian religious ideals, and relied on Euro-Canadian sports and games to help them accomplish this task (Pettipas 1994).

In order for the process of cultural regulation to work, there had to be a reference point for assessing the difference between “savage” and “civilized” behaviours. Without such a point to mediate this understanding, attempts to “civilize” Aboriginal people lacked meaning. The habituated practices of colonial authorities provided the foundation upon which this understanding was based, and Euro-Canadian sports and games provided a convenient standard with which to measure such behaviours. At the local level, where the missionaries and Indian agents attempted to carry out their directives, traditional physical practices were discouraged as much as possible, and, to fill the void caused by their absence, were replaced with Euro-Canadian sports and games. It was hoped that this process of cultural replacement would facilitate an understanding of Euro-Canadian sports and games as “modern” and appropriate behaviours while positioning Aboriginal physical practices as “uncivilized” and undesirable (Paraschak 1998). Within these repressive environments, “sports days” emerged as appropriate forms of social activities for Aboriginal people and were often held in conjunction with national celebrations, like Dominion Day, thereby symbolically linking sports to Canadian citizenship and patriotic duty. Sports days also coincided with Euro-Canadian styled gatherings, like White-sponsored stampedes, agricultural exhibitions and fairs, and government-approved community celebrations, suggesting that Euro-Canadian sports and games would help usher Aboriginal people into the 20<sup>th</sup> century through hard work and patriotic play.

The extent to which sports days replaced Aboriginal ceremonies is not discussed in the secondary source literature, though it is possible they took on more significance for Aboriginal people after 1914, when off-reserve dancing was punishable by fine or imprisonment. Nevertheless, it is clear that sports days were opportunities for Aboriginal people to gather without raising the suspicions of the local missionaries or Indian agent. Accordingly, sports days served a dual purpose for Aboriginal participants. On the one hand, they were opportunities to engage in friendly competition, a practice that was already well established among Aboriginal people throughout the land. On the other hand, they were also opportunities to host traditional religious ceremonies, as some people took advantage of these hectic and boisterous meetings to engage in their old time practices. For example, Daniel Kennedy, an Assiniboine Chief from Saskatchewan, recalls how his elders used him as a spokesperson to convince Indian Affairs’ officials to host local dances under cover of sports days and other Euro-Canadian celebrations (Kennedy cited in Gresko 1986, 100). Many Aboriginal people integrated Euro-Canadian sports and games into their everyday lives, and at least some people did so as a way to divert attention away from the practice of their traditional pursuits.

Rewards for participation were a prominent feature of sports days. Through this system of symbolic signification, government and religious authorities deliberately encouraged participation in "modern" Euro-Canadian forms of activities by publicly rewarding individuals who "adopted the dominant society's value system and lifestyle" while simultaneously discouraging traditional physical practices by actively repressing them (Pettipas 1994, 160). Take, for example, the Indian agent for the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta who, in 1917, recommended that Indian Affairs allocate a grant for the purchase of prizes for fairs and sports meets, but for Euro-Canadian forms of activities only (Pettipas 1994). Symbolic awards and recognition, whether in the form of cash prizes or medals, thus played a key role in encouraging conformity to Euro-Canadian culture.

### **Sports and Games at Residential Schools**

The most aggressive attempt to Christianize and civilize Aboriginal people was done through the residential school system. In his detailed study on residential schools in Canada, Jim Miller discusses the difference between education and schooling, noting how the two concepts are often mistaken to be one and the same. According to Miller, education is a process that all cultures of the world possess, but not all cultures engage in schooling to educate their young (Miller 1996). The difference between these two practices is more than a matter of degrees; it has to do with practices that are fundamental to creating and maintaining cultural stability (e.g. Heine 1999; Heine 1998; Mitchell 1978).

Profound changes came with the establishment of the residential school system in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Missionaries had tried to establish schools in eastern Canada as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but their initiatives failed to take root; there was little incentive for Aboriginal people to alter their traditional ways, since their knowledge of the land and its resources was still vital to their survival and provided a viable means for living. Religious authorities would have to wait another two hundred years before their visions for schooling were implemented, and this was achieved only after many nations, weakened by disease and starvation, acquiesced to federal demands to settle on reserves.

Soon after Confederation in 1867, the new federal government was given legislative responsibility for Indian Affairs and an administrative team was charged with the responsibility of creating a national policy on Aboriginal education, with the federal authorities relying on the services of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches to implement its programme. It was in this fashion that the two major institutions that came to dominate Aboriginal life, the church and state,

pooled their limited human and financial resources to Christianize and civilize Aboriginal children. For roughly one hundred years, beginning in 1880, when the first policy on Aboriginal education was drafted, to 1996, when the last government-run school closed its doors, many Aboriginal youth received their education away from home and off the land.

In order for the schooling to be effective, it had to be a "lived" experience. Euro-Canadian sports and games were integral to Indian Affairs' assimilative program, a reality that is well understood by Aboriginal people today. The *Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) notes how Indian Affairs looked to popular Euro-Canadian sports and games to help bring about fundamental changes in the values and behaviours of its students. It was thought that participation in Euro-Canadian activities would contribute to the breakdown of communal values by fostering a competitive spirit among the pupils, and hopefully, through regulated instruction, the skills they learned would translate into a desire for individual achievement and wealth (Canada 1996).

Generally speaking, in Canada, federal priorities for Aboriginal education shaped the kinds of sport and recreation activities that were offered at government-run schools. Two broad phases, differentiated by changes to the 1951 *Indian Act*, characterize the federal approach towards Aboriginal education. The policy approach taken during each phase influenced the types of sport and recreation opportunities that were available at these institutions. As the federal policy on Aboriginal education shifted, so too did its emphasis on sports and games, with organized sports and games becoming more pronounced as missionaries and bureaucrats alike attempted to integrate Aboriginal youth into Euro-Canadian culture. In short, the more the government focused on assimilation, the more important organized activities became to the overall agenda.

### *Pre-1951*

In the pre-1951 era, the primary responsibility for schooling fell to the churches. Left largely to their own devices, religious officials implemented curricula geared towards their own practical and moral objectives. Financial support was provided by the federal government through a per capita grant system that operated according to the number of bodies enrolled in each school. The more bodies identified on the registry, the greater the amount of funding from Indian Affairs. The per capita grant system might have seemed like a financially-prudent decision to the bureaucrats in Ottawa, but in practice it led to fierce denominational rivalry among the different sects competing for student bodies (Miller 1996). This rivalry, combined with the lack of standard curricula and the means to enforce it, meant that the residential schools throughout this



period were chronically underfunded, almost always in disrepair, poorly staffed, and lacking qualified teachers. Of the students who survived the impoverished conditions—and the emotional, psychological, and physical abuse present in some schools—the vast majority were neither prepared to take their place in the dominant labour force, nor able to contribute effectively to reserve life.

In light of these circumstances, it is no surprise that physical education programs were linked directly to physical health. From the early 1900s to the late 1940s, waves of communicable diseases circulated through the schools wreaking havoc on the bodies of Aboriginal pupils, who were generally overworked, underfed, and emotionally exhausted, leaving them vulnerable to virus and infection. These matters were made worse by the terrible living conditions inside the schools, which were characterized by overcrowded rooms and poor air circulation. According to historian Mary-Ellen Kelm (2001), Indian Affairs' failure to improve the health of the pupils in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the abolishment of the residential school system in later years. As parents increasingly spoke out against the atrocities of residential schooling, Indian Affairs had little choice but to address the high morbidity and mortality rates among its students. The numbers of dead or ill were simply too high. The introduction of physical education curricula was thus an efficient and cost-effective way for dealing with the recurrent health issues in the schools.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, callisthenic programs were widely utilized as part of the health curricula. Indian Affairs introduced these exercises in 1910 in an effort to reduce the spread of pulmonary disease among its pupils (Department of Indian Affairs 1910). These exercises could be performed indoors when the weather was poor because they required relatively little space and no equipment, but instructors were encouraged to move outdoors whenever possible to capitalize on the fresh air. Aboriginal bodies, once a symbol of strength and virility, were repositioned within the growing discourse on physical education as weak and diseased, justifying the need for proper, orderly instruction on how to regain their vitality.

The introduction of callisthenic programs coincided with the use of military drill, which was also a common feature of the public school system by virtue of funding through the Strathcona Trust (Morrow 1977). The link between military training and nationalism was unmistakable as the drills were designed to replace tribal allegiances with a sense of patriotic duty; callisthenic programs were constructed along similarly regimented lines. Even in the far north, at the Hay River Mission School located on the southern tip of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest

Territories, Aboriginal pupils, male and female, were trained in the military style (Heine 1995).

Popular recreational activities, like basketball, baseball, and hockey, rounded out the regimen by providing the students with some respite from the monotony of everyday life, but these opportunities were few and far between and were available mainly to boys. For the most part, students played with and amongst themselves, although, from time to time, organized activities were arranged with students from nearby residential schools or, less frequently, with non-Aboriginal students from urban areas. However, these meetings usually occurred only on special occasions and were normally limited to sports days or national celebrations. Though most students seemed to have enjoyed these activities, it is clear that sports and games were used as tools to discipline the students, as school instructors augmented their power by awarding or withholding recreation time. Sports and games were thus collateral for teaching obedience to school rules; they were not a right, but a "reward" for good behaviour. Pupils who disobeyed the rules or fell into disfavour with the instructors had their recreation privileges taken away (e.g. Gresko 1986; Persson 1986).

Mass displays and sporting competitions also provided church and state with opportunities to promote assimilation and to attract new students to school. In areas where there was more than one school, the parents had some measure of control over where their children would be educated. It is possible that physical education programs could help sway their opinions. Images of young bodies moving in formation could evoke ideas about health and well-being and lend visible support to the ideological contention that the children were being mentally and physically prepared to meet the demands expected of them in the labour force. Many families, however, had little or no input as to where their children would be kept, nor did they have much contact with their children during the school year. Thus, it is more likely that the military drills and mass gymnastic displays were contrived to win public support for the federal agenda than they were to gain parental support.

Euro-Canadian sports and games also reinforced the dominant assumptions about appropriate male and female sporting behaviour. As was the case in the public school system, Aboriginal boys and girls were channelled into gender appropriate activities. Male students were provided with opportunities to participate in vigorous activities that developed their manly character, while female students were encouraged to participate in gentle, healthful exercises that were deemed appropriate for young women, despite the fact that they were required to demonstrate incredible strength and stamina as the housekeepers of entire institutions.

The inculcation of gendered norms through sports and games did not escape the participants, as one female student explained,

Boring, that's what play time was. Some play. We couldn't do nothing. Dolls, knitting, things like that, but not playing, not like the boys. They had balls, bats, hockey sticks, everything. Sundays were the worst. I hated Sundays. We couldn't even work on Sundays. Just sat in the playroom or went out on those awful walks. (Fiske 1981, 36)

Opportunities for females to engage in competition or participate in traditionally male-dominated sports were apparently rare. An exception to this rule was the Mohawk Institute, where, in the early 1900s, female students played ice hockey in their recreation time. According to Martha Hill, a former student of the school, the girls were "a little clumsy" in getting the puck to "go right" on the ice (Graham 1997, 356). Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess the sporting experiences of female students, as historians have tended to overlook their participation in this area of social life.

Physical activity programs in the residential schools during the pre-1951 era were characterized by callisthenic exercises and military drills. The general purpose of these activities was to encourage better health, to replace traditional physical practices with "appropriate" physical behaviours, to prepare the students for citizenship, and to impart gendered norms. Although the activities changed in the post-1951 era, ushering in a new emphasis on competitive amateur sports, the underlying principles remained largely the same.

### *Post-1951*

The post-1951 era marks a shift in the balance of power between church and state, with Indian Affairs taking on more responsibility for government-run schools. Two key factors precipitated this move. First, the churches were more interested in converting the young than providing them with vocational training; government interference was deemed necessary if the youth were ever to become productive members of society. Second, increasing public awareness about the deplorable conditions in the schools gave strength to Aboriginal demands for better quality of care and education. These factors led Indian Affairs to take over the hiring of teachers, replacing unqualified missionary instructors with professionally trained staff who could implement provincial curricula, and substituting the per capita grant system with a global funding structure (herein provided funding to institutions based on grant applications), though strict criteria prevented many school administrators from accessing these resources (Miller 1996). In spite of these improvements, the government

was still unwilling to make serious investments in Aboriginal education and looked increasingly towards the public school system to achieve assimilation.

Athletic competitions became a more pronounced feature of residential schools during this era because federal officials believed these contests would help facilitate assimilation and encouraged school staff to promote participation, especially in team sports. In Alberta, Blue Quills Indian Residential School held its first all-Aboriginal track and field meet in 1961, presenting the first opportunity for its students to develop contacts with students at other Indian schools (Persson 1986). Some institutions developed outstanding athletic programs, and a number of students, who honed their athletic skills in the residential school system, later moved on to professional sports careers or competed successfully in elite level amateur sport (Dewar 1986). Yet even when the global funding system was implemented by Indian Affairs, funding for sport and recreation remained scarce and primarily those institutions situated a reasonable distance from other Indian schools or urban centres, and managed by sports-minded teachers and administrators, engaged in regular, competitive play (Miller 1996).

During this era, competitive sporting events replaced the mass displays and military drills as the most efficient way for the government to achieve assimilation. The competitive ethos that accompanied sport furnished these meetings with signifying power so that contests between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teams were more than just fun and games, they were highly racialized events (Churchill, Hill, and Barlow 1979). In the words of historian John Bloom, "Not only did winning teams spread a school's name but they also provided an easily interpreted set of representations that fit well with the boarding-school agenda" (Bloom 1996, 98).

In the United States, school administrators, sport organizers, and the media framed such contests as battles between the "Indians" and the "Whites" in an attempt to fill the stands (Bloom 2000). Gate receipts were crucial for developing and maintaining competitive schedules at government-run schools, like Carlisle and Haskell, where funding for elite level sport was limited. According to historian Raymond Schmidt (2001), the Haskell Institute football team, one of the top football teams in the country during the interwar years, never once received federal subsidies for its athletic competitions. The winning tradition generated by successive football teams at Haskell led to the construction in 1926 of a massive stadium seating about 10,000 fans—a project that was financed entirely by monies raised by Native American supporters throughout the country (Schmidt 2001; Bloom 1996). Although victories amassed by Carlisle and Haskell have dominated the sport scholarship, it is clear that administrators at

other American Indian boarding schools valued the public recognition that competitive sports provided to their institutions and invested a great deal of time and energy to produce the best athletes and teams possible (Lomawaima 1994; Trennert 1988).

There is a dearth of information on the use of competitive sports and games as public relations tools in Canadian residential schools. The only mention of this aspect of residential school life in the Canadian context can be found in Celia Haig-Brown's (1988) study on Shushwap experiences at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. Further studies on this area of residential school life would enhance our understanding of the way Euro-Canadian sports and games emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the dominant way of playing.

With the development of a competitive ethos in the school system, winning took on increased significance. Students, as well as their instructors, placed a high premium on successful teams and athletes, especially when competing in explicitly racialized contexts where meetings were framed as "Indian" versus "White" contests. Athletic competitions were arenas where ideas about race, as well as gender, were contested on a regular basis. For many Aboriginal youth, however, athletic competitions were one of the few areas of life where they could derive some pleasure and foster a sense of pride. Sometimes the contests were one-sided affairs. In his autobiography, *Indian School Days*, Basil Johnston (1988) recalls how male student-athletes at Spanish Indian Residential School, in Ontario, repeatedly had their clothes and bodies "patched up" and sent back onto the playing field to finish matches against older and stronger White teams. He describes one particularly memorable game of touch football played against a group of senior high school students from the nearby town of Espanola. His comment highlights the importance of winning but also suggests the heightened sense of masculinity and race that students might have felt in a competitive atmosphere:

If we were expected to risk cuts, gashes, lacerations, bruises, welts and maybe even broken bones while clinging to Jack Major or oversized backs, we preferred to maintain some style and respectability while doing so. (Johnston 1988, 206)

If Johnston and his teammates could not win against the White teams, then losing with their dignity intact was the next best thing.

In the logic of competitive sports and games, medals and awards became an important means through which to articulate and reinforce a narrative of "progress" among Aboriginal people. Winning athletes came to symbolize the best their race had to offer. Within this competitive

context, male athletes emerged as the symbolic leaders of the residential school era (Dewar 1986). Female athletes, in contrast, were generally relegated to non-competitive events or participated in contests where the social aspect outweighed the competitive. Similar to the pre-1951 era, stories of female participation in competitive sports are conspicuous in their absence from the literature on residential school experiences. Though most references to "athletes" do not specify whether the subject is male or female, it is clear from the type of activities available—boisterous, competitive sport—that the term "athlete" almost always refers to a male. The treatment resulting from this differential status could be dramatic. As K. Tsianina Lomawaima (1994) points out in her study on Chilocco Indian School in northeast Oklahoma, the athletes were "universally respected" by their peers and administrators (125), leaving most females to earn respect through other means, as this avenue for expression was available only to the male students. In either case, winning athletes and teams signified disciplined, civilized bodies and Indian Affairs and school administrators were proud of their winning traditions.

The overwhelming emphasis on a competitive sports structure meant that male athletes received the majority of the limited financial support for equipment, coaching, and travel that was provided by Indian Affairs. For boys, being on a sports team had its privileges. The most significant advantage was time away from school, but fringe benefits could also entail better food and accommodations. Few oral histories challenge the overwhelmingly positive spin on sport and recreation adopted by former residential school students. Most accounts suggest that the students embraced the idea that athletic excellence would help to improve the morale at school. However, at least one female student at Kamloops recognized the rhetoric as empty dogma, stating, "You won prizes and wondered why the hell you even bothered to go because when you got back it was still the same way" (Haig-Brown 1988, 72). Gradually, as Indian Affairs moved away from direct involvement in the day-to-day operations of Aboriginal education by transferring administrative responsibility to regional school authorities, the residential schools were shut down and the students were sent into the mainstream public education system.

Whatever visions of progress the sporting events and athletic bodies provided for the participants, religious officials, government agents, or the general public, they had little or no basis in real life. They were ideological in the sense that the Aboriginal participants were ill-prepared to meet the growing demands of a skilled workforce. Nor was sport the great leveller that advocates claimed. Most often, it accentuated and exacerbated the perceived differences between people, with negative connotations attached to traditional Aboriginal practices and positive reaffirming

qualities attached to modern Euro-Canadian activities. For most Aboriginal athletes, the reality was that their successes in sport and recreation left broader relations of power untouched.

## Conclusion

Analyses of the *Indian Act* often overlook the role of Euro-Canadian sports and games as a part of the broader assimilative agenda in Canada. This oversight is understandable given the need to remedy more pressing matters, such as housing, health care, education, and land claims. When viewed from this broader social vantage point, research that explores the relationship between government policies and legislation and opportunities for Aboriginal sport and recreation seems like a trivial undertaking.

However, the link between the concepts embedded in policies and legislation and the concrete practices that flow from them is not something to be taken lightly. As this brief analysis shows, the *Indian Act* was (and still is) a significant piece of legislation in terms of Aboriginal sport history in that it structured the possibilities for Aboriginal participation in sport in Canada and legitimized Euro-Canadian ways of playing as the most appropriate forms of play.

The fact that Euro-Canadian sport and games are *not* identified in the *Indian Act* is also important because it speaks to the firm belief that existed among federal decision-makers that Aboriginal people would naturally adopt Euro-Canadian ways of playing once their cultural traditions were wiped out and their children enrolled in school. The absence of these elements in the *Act* has also diverted attention away from serious scholarly analysis that could shed some light on how federal Indian policies and legislation shaped, and continue to shape, Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) sport practices in Canada.

Ultimately, this paper problematizes the assumption that minority cultures can selectively integrate into the dominant sporting culture and find affirmation and acceptance in these foreign spaces. Even though history has shown that Aboriginal people refashioned Euro-Canadian ways of playing into meaningful opportunities that reinforced their cultural identities, they did so under very limiting conditions; colonization is not a negotiation between equal partners but a process whereby one group claims the authority to rule over another and impose its will on them, leaving the dominated group with little choice but to respond to the best of its ability. In order to gain a better understanding of how organized sport has contributed to the construction of a Euro-Canadian identity, we need to explore how policies and legislation—abstractions of official intentions—were implemented on the ground, resulting in concrete

opportunities that were either accepted or challenged by the recipients of a new sporting culture. Aboriginal people in particular had few alternatives but to accept the dominant ways of playing, as this was all that was made available for them by government agents and church officials.

More broadly speaking, this paper also demonstrates the need for scholars to recognize the different historical benchmarks that mark Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sport history. The extent to which the *Indian Act*—and the timelines that distinguish each feature of the *Act* (e.g., cultural repression and residential schooling)—influenced non-Aboriginal sporting practices in Canada is not known. What is clear is that federal Indian policies and legislation helped to legitimize and naturalize Euro-Canadian sports and games as the most appropriate forms of physical expression and, in that regard, influenced the structure of Canadian sport by not challenging its dominance. Moreover, a different set of historical benchmarks guide our understanding of Aboriginal participation in sport. Oftentimes, these benchmarks exclude dates that are significant to Aboriginal people (e.g., 1876, the creation of the *Indian Act*), thereby reinforcing dominant notions about the centrality and importance of Euro-Canadian sporting practices. Contrarily, this examination of the *Indian Act* and its relationship to Aboriginal physical cultural practices shows how abstract concepts, embedded in Indian legislation and policies, supported by a network of compliant institutions, influenced the types of opportunities that were made available to Aboriginal people and, at the same time, shaped our Canadian sporting heritage. It remains to be seen how Aboriginal participants in contemporary sport will maintain their unique ways of living and doing sport when, perhaps, what they are being offered is a constantly unfolding set of opportunities to integrate into the mainstream. It also remains to be seen how historians will link the turning points in Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian sport history to explore how government policies and legislation differentially shaped and reshaped the sporting experiences of Canadians.

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