“Aboriginal Hockey: The Story of Three Canadian Communities”

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First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples have a long history of playing games and sports in Canada, although ice hockey (at least as it is played today) is a relatively new sport for them. Many Aboriginal youth first learned how to play hockey in residential schools. While the experience of playing hockey (and other sports) during recreation time may have been a positive one for many students, it must not be forgotten that the Federal government’s ultimate goal was to wipe away any trace of Aboriginal culture from the minds of the students so that they might become “civilized” and then assimilated into mainstream society; it was assumed that hockey and other sports would help the government achieve this goal. Ultimately, the “experiment” failed; residential schools eventually closed their doors. While hockey has become a dominant sport in many Aboriginal communities today, this paper will examine how Aboriginal peoples have resisted the cultural “rules” of the game that are largely taken for granted in non-Aboriginal society. Ironically, Aboriginal peoples are also using sports like hockey to celebrate their unity, pride, and “the survival of their cultures and identities.”

This paper will also discuss the barriers that Aboriginal hockey players must break down in order to play hockey (or other sports) at the elite level in Canada. It has been claimed, “while the nature of sport is competition where ability tells, the reality is that race restricts.” Along with racism, socio-economic status, geography, coaching, and culture shock are other factors that impact the ability of Aboriginal youth to play hockey. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of three different Aboriginal communities located in Holman, Northwest Territories; The Pas, Manitoba; and Standoff, Alberta, it will be possible to illustrate how hockey has

impacted each community differently, as the problematic issues mentioned above have affected Canada’s Aboriginal communities in varying degrees, depending on the individual circumstances of each band.

Aboriginal people have been living in Alberta for over 12,000 years, even longer in the Yukon.³ Oral accounts tell us that well before Europeans came to North America, “Aboriginal peoples played games, competed, and tested one another physically.”⁴ For instance, the hand game was a popular game involving teams that used “hand signals and body actions to hide small objects…in their fists, or sometimes under a blanket.”⁵ Other games included “foot racing, spear throwing, horse racing, and archery contests….Among the Inuit, bouts of finger or lip pulling…placed a premium on the ability to withstand pain.”⁶ Children who participated in games often learned critical survival skills.⁷ Stick and ball games like baggataway (lacrosse) were believed to have supernatural power and healing properties that “strengthened the existing tribal leadership while promoting future leaders, and fostered a group cohesiveness that served the economic and military interests of the tribe.”⁸ As in Euro-Canadian society, many games and sports in Aboriginal communities have always had a purpose beyond that of simple recreational activity.

When Europeans first made contact with First Nations peoples in the seventeenth century, it was quickly understood that “an indigenous way of life…required not only ingenuity

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⁵ Morrow and Wamsley, Sport in Canada, 11.  
⁷ Morrow and Wamsley, Sport in Canada, 9.  
⁸ Howell, Blood, Sweat, and Cheers, 26.
but also profound physical and mental fortitude.”

No one understood the difficulty of surviving in a harsh and unforgiving land more clearly than the French *coureurs de bois*, who began using First Nations knowledge of the land as well as their clothing, canoes, toboggans, and snowshoes in order to survive in the rugged Canadian wilderness. In the nineteenth century, an “emergent business/professional class began constructing notions of a Canadian consciousness linked to themes of survival and northern character.” They turned to a First Nations game, the violent and rugged game of lacrosse, to define what it meant to be a man in Canada. W. George Beers, an avid promoter of Canada and the game of lacrosse, arrogantly proclaimed, “Just as we claim as Canadian the rivers and lakes and land once owned exclusively by Indians, so we now claim their field game as the national field game of our dominion.” In the early 1900s, when the National Lacrosse Association decided to ban all players who had gambled on sports (which was a First Nations tradition) or who had been paid for playing sports (working-class men), athletes turned to hockey, another violent, aggressive, and manly game that was very similar to lacrosse. In fact, many games that were similar to what would become the organized game of hockey had been played in Canada by First Nations peoples for years. In western Canada, “a game resembling shinny was played with a leather ball and stick. On the east coast, the Mi’kmaq and Maliseet peoples played a game called ‘old fashion,’ which resembled the British

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10 Robidoux, “Historical Interpretations,” 134-35.
11 Ibid., 138.
12 Ibid., 141.
game of rounders.”¹⁶ Huron youth “played a modified form of lacrosse on the ice that had many similarities to the game of hockey.”¹⁷ What was most important for nationalists like Beers, was that the game of hockey was “uniquely Canadian in origin and character.”¹⁸ Of course, the early connection to the Aboriginal game of lacrosse was quickly forgotten. The actual rules for playing hockey were borrowed from a host of other sports including field hockey, lacrosse, polo, and rugby, as “hockey was bricolage, a series of sporting pastimes re-ordered and re-contextualized, to better suit athletes whose landscape was frozen six months of the year.”¹⁹

Decades later, Aboriginal communities would be introduced to this “new” game of hockey.

For many First Nations people, organized hockey was first introduced at residential schools as an assimilative strategy of the Federal government.²⁰ Beginning in the 1880s, Aboriginal activities such as potlatch ceremonies, traditional dances and gatherings had been banned by the government in an attempt to “bring indigenous beliefs and customs in line with mainstream values and practices.”²¹ Residential schools, it was believed, would serve to teach Aboriginal youth Christian principles and Euro-Canadian values; “traditional customs and beliefs were to be erased and language and appearance were to be modified.”²² Janice Forsyth and Kevin B. Wamsley maintained that while sports and other recreational activities were used to teach Euro-Canadian children values considered to be important, in the residential schools, such activities had an assimilative purpose.²³

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¹⁶ Ibid., 26-27.
¹⁸ Robidoux, “Imagining a Canadian Identity,” 218.
¹⁹ Robidoux, Men at Play, 44.
²¹ Forsyth and Wamsley, “‘Native to Native,’” 296-97.
²² Ibid., 298-99.
²³ Ibid., 299.
The goals of school administrators and government officials were not always achieved, as can be seen in John Bloom’s study of former students, at various Indian boarding schools in the United States, who took part in sports activities. Using the oral testimonies of students, Bloom found that sports often provided students with an opportunity to: 1) gain a sense of pride, especially when beating white teams; 2) meet other Indians from many different tribes and cultures; 3) resist the disciplined environment of the schools; and 4) simply enjoy themselves.24 First Nation students in Canada probably employed these forms of “resistance” as well. That there were positive aspects about residential schools cannot be denied. John Friesen recounted the oral testimonies of elders from the Kainai First Nation in Alberta who shared their residential school experiences, many of which included positive accounts of new sports and other skills that they had learned.25 For instance, Frank Manyfingers recalled that “we enjoyed sports such as hockey, football and baseball at school.”26 Don Sandberg, a band member of Norway House Cree First Nation, claimed that he had watched enviously as his treaty Indian friends returned from residential school each year with improved skating skills and a growing vocabulary of English words and phrases. He had seen a marvelous room filled with new skates and equipment at a residential school, and he knew that many of the schools had good teachers from the surrounding reserves.27 Unfortunately, the history of residential schools in Canada also has a dark side. First Nations parents wanted their children to learn how to read and write; they did not want to see their children assimilated into Canadian society. While only approximately one-

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third of the population of school-aged First Nations children attended these schools, too many experienced harsh discipline, abuse, illness, and even death. Although the game of hockey has often been romanticized, it is important that Canadians understand that a kind of “cultural amnesia about the social struggles and vested interests...between men and women, social classes, regions, races, and ethnic groups...have always been part of hockey’s history.” For many First Nations children, participating in enjoyable recreational activities like hockey, also involved long periods of separation from their families as well as other hardships. Today there are still many struggles that Aboriginal people face in order to participate in organized hockey.

It is appropriate in a study of Aboriginal hockey to include the experiences of the first status Indian to play hockey in the NHL. Freddie Sasakamoose was born in 1933 on the Sandy Lake Indian Reserve in rural Saskatchewan (now the Ahtahkakoop First Nation). His family was poor, and the reserve was an extremely “isolated community that could only be accessed by boat, sled or winter road.” His first memory of hockey was no doubt similar to thousands of other children who have grown up in Canada. He could not buy a hockey stick, so he made one from a red willow: “I’d find a branch, one that was crooked at the end, and chop it off. I’d use any damn thing I could find for a puck, stones or rocks or cans. Maybe even a frozen apple or two, eh?” When Freddie was sent to residential school, his evenings were spent playing hockey: “The priests who ran the school were from Montreal and you know how those French

28 J.R. Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001), 264-269.
31 Ibid., 32.
32 Brenda Zeman, To Run with Longboat: Twelve Stories of Indian Athletes in Canada, ed. David Williams (Edmonton: GMS2 Ventures Inc., 1988), 44.
men are. They love their hockey. We skated every day. Seven days a week. We got one
dessert a week. On Sundays, I traded my ice cream for an extra hour of skating.”

After being discovered by scouts when he was 14 years old, Freddie had to be convinced
to go to Moose Jaw to play Junior hockey. For Freddie, Moose Jaw was a crowded city, and he
missed his home. As has also been the case for the majority of Aboriginal hockey players, he
became accustomed to hearing racial insults from spectators when he played hockey in prairie
towns and cities. When he was 19 years old, he was told to report to the Chicago Blackhawks.
For Freddie, it was a dream come true, but the loneliness was something he could not get used to,
and he quit after only 13 games. Don Marks, who has interviewed many former and current
NHL Aboriginal players, explained that “Indian health and success stems from natural, holistic
balance. Healing and harmony can only be achieved if all four aspects of the human being –
body, mind, emotions, and spirit – are in synch.” Freddie’s body may have been ready and
willing to play a game he loved, but his mind, emotions, and spirit were not. Is it possible that
Aboriginal people, due to their different cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, view
hockey differently than non-Aboriginal people? Studying the experiences of three different
Aboriginal communities who are ardent fans of the game of hockey (the Inuit community of
Holman, N.W.T., the Opaskwayak Cree Nation at The Pas, Manitoba, and the Kainai First
Nation community at Standoff, Alberta) may help to provide insight regarding the above
question.

While studying the hunting behavior of Copper Inuit men from the community of
Holman, a small, isolated town located on Victoria Island, Northwest Territories, Peter Collings

33 Marks, They Call Me Chief, 34.
34 Ibid., 35-42.
35 Ibid., 40.
36 Ibid.
and Richard G. Condon decided to enlarge their research focus and study the impact of hockey on the lives of the 20-35 year-old men that were a part of their study.\(^{37}\) Before 1980, board games, tag, and kickball were the games of choice, not hockey, while the more traditional Inuit games like leg wrestling or finger pull were only played occasionally. Since 1980, increased government funding for organized sports activities has seen the growing hamlet of Holman gain a gymnasium, baseball diamonds, golf course, hockey arena, and two curling rinks.\(^{38}\) At first hockey games were only watched on television or listened to on the radio (televisions and radios were new arrivals to Holman in 1980).\(^{39}\) Once hockey sticks became available and donated skates arrived, children began to enjoy playing pond hockey. Once the outdoor rink was built and a league, draft, and set of rules were incorporated, competition, fighting, and verbal aggression began to increase. After the indoor arena was built in 1989, hockey became the most popular sport in the community.\(^{40}\) No doubt the arena filled an important social role for the community, just as it has for many non-Aboriginal communities across Canada.

According to Condon, some members of the community believed that sports were a beneficial and unifying force, as evidenced by the posters displayed around town that declared: “Recreation is Bringing the Community Together!”\(^ {41}\) Those who enjoyed hockey believed that the game was helping to unify the community by bringing people together to cheer on their favorite teams and socialize at the same time. Others remained unconvinced, claiming that the


\(^{40}\) Ibid, 254-55.

hockey rink had become a place of conflict detrimental to the welfare of the town.⁴² In a study completed in 1987-88, Condon noted that competitive sports like hockey had fueled “the vast majority of conflicts….Rarely does a sports match take place today among males without a heated argument or physical fight between players.”⁴³ According to Condon, verbal and physical confrontations at competitive sporting events had increased dramatically over the six years that he worked in Holman doing research.⁴⁴ The game of hockey (not to mention other competitive Euro-Canadian sports) seems to have impacted this Inuit community in both positive and negative ways.

It is no secret that Inuit society has undergone many changes in the past few decades, and social problems like alcohol abuse, theft, and assault are on the rise.⁴⁵ It is possible that hockey has helped Inuit men deal with the stresses of living in a community where a traditional way of life is no longer possible and where massive social, economic, and political changes have occurred over a very short period of time.⁴⁶ Collings and Condon argued that “in a community where there are limited opportunities…to attain high status (either in the old status hierarchy of hunting/fishing/trapping or the new status hierarchy of high paying employment), playing hockey well…[increases] a young man’s sense of identity and self-worth.”⁴⁷ To illustrate exactly how limited the opportunities are in Holman, of the 48 hockey players in the study, only 35 percent had full-time employment in 1993-93.⁴⁸ Hockey may have provided these men with an excellent opportunity to gain self-respect.

⁴⁴ Ibid.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 258.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 256.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 258.
There was another way that hockey players may have been attempting to raise their status in the community. Hockey players who were able to play with a serious injury demonstrated to the community that they were tough and worthy of their community’s esteem. For most of the younger men of Holman, hunting and fishing (still regarded as highly-valued occupations within Inuit society) were no longer viable options for them; therefore, some players may have been using their injuries as a way of competing with the well-esteemed Inuit hunters or fishermen of the community for status.\textsuperscript{49} It is possible that for a community struggling with high unemployment and substance abuse, hockey has served an important role.

A researcher studying a different Inuit community agreed that sports were playing an important role in helping the younger generation gain valuable social skills and confidence. In addition, he claimed that Inuit youth were very “aware of the gap separating them from…[non-Aboriginals] in many other areas of modern life (i.e. work and education skills), but gain much satisfaction from the knowledge that in the area of basketball and volleyball, they compete on the same level.”\textsuperscript{50} While most young adults in southern Canada have the opportunity to obtain an education and career, this is not the case for many Aboriginal youth growing up in isolated northern communities. They must gain a sense of self-identity and self-respect by some other means.\textsuperscript{51} When Inuit men played hockey games against “southerners” and beat them, no doubt they felt the same sense of satisfaction and pride.

Another fascinating aspect of Inuit hockey is the impact that different cultural beliefs have on Inuit and non-Inuit hockey players (as well as spectators). Many white “southerners” who move up to the Arctic firmly believe that hockey (or other sports) can bring people of

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 259-60.
different cultures and races together, and their goal was to teach the Inuit “the proper, Canadian way of doing so.” It is the non-Aboriginal members of society who have determined how hockey should be played, with their own set ideas about the types of behavior that they consider acceptable, and the acts of violence that are not. Collings and Condon had observed that there were “very few fights in which the players drop their gloves and seek to pulverize each other with their fists….A typical violent interaction involves one player skating up behind the other and lashing at him with a stick or gloved fist and then skating away.” While this non-conventional (at least by non-Aboriginal standards) behavior by Inuit players might be considered dishonorable in southern Canada, in Inuit culture, face-to-face confrontations historically were extremely rare. For example, if an Inuit man wanted to kill another, the attack would invariably come from behind. In the view of non-Aboriginal hockey players and fans, this type of “uncivilized” behavior does not promote the ideals of masculinity or fair play that have been constructed around the game of hockey; therefore, such behavior is considered to be unacceptable by the standards of mainstream society. It is possible that cultural differences between Inuit and non-Inuit players may only increase the tension and hostility that already exists in the ultra-competitive game of hockey, increasing the possibility of aggressive behavior and racial taunting of both players and fans of opposing teams. The interesting question is if cultural differences evaporate when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players are playing for the same hockey team and their fans are sitting together in the same stands. This scenario actually exists for the following two communities.

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52 Ibid., 257.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Just as in Holman, hockey is also important to the northern Manitoba Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN), owners of the successful OCN Blizzard of the Manitoba Junior Hockey League. Directly across the Saskatchewan River, The Pas (the Cree name for the town can be translated as “where the river narrows”), is the home of approximately 6,000 mostly non-Aboriginal townspeople. The OCN has approximately 4,000 First Nation residents. The OCN used the money they received from their land-claim settlement to build a new hotel, high school, hockey arena, and shopping mall on the reserve. The next step was to get a Junior A hockey team. The league had one stipulation: OCN would have to pay the travel costs of the competition due to their remote location. Within four months they had a team on the ice.

The Pas has a long history of conflict with the Cree community on the other side of the river. Louis Personius, the team’s Cree director claimed: “Before the [sic] hockey there was little or no communication between the white and the Native people, but there is now. There’s no doubt about that. Whites in the town and from the mill, too, they all say that.” Assistant Trainer Terry Desjarlais, an Aboriginal from Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan claimed that the Blizzard was “the best thing that has happened to the north in years. Before this team, the river was a real social, as well as geographic, dividing line between the town and the reserve. Now everybody talks hockey.” According to Pat Personius, the brother of Louis, hockey is very important to a lot of the people of the OCN, including their uncle: “He loves hockey. He’d stay in an arena all day. Heck, if it’s a tournament, he’d probably sleep there.” Assistant Coach

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57 Boyd, *All Roads Lead to Hockey*, 47.
60 Ibid., 57.
61 Ibid., 51.
Wayne Hawrysh, a non-Aboriginal, is also convinced that the Blizzard has been a good thing for The Pas: “Everyone picks up on it – writers, TV people, what have you. It sounds as if they’re overdoing it, that it’s a promotional thing they’re trying to get the most mileage from. But there’s no doubt that it has brought the communities closer together.” Gary Hopper, the mayor of The Pas, also concurred that it was the hockey team that “bridged the divide.” People on both sides of the river bought season’s tickets to watch the Blizzard, “and all of a sudden there was white sitting beside native, a total mix, and new friendships developing.” The Blizzard play a “bruising style of hockey…[that fills] so many arenas on the road that it has been credited with saving a league that, ironically, once ostracized Cree players.” When the Blizzards play, OCN fans are boisterous, and the arena is loud “with their obnoxious air horns and vulgar chants.” There can be no doubt that the OCN are passionate about hockey.

At one time, the townspeople of The Pas would never visit the reserve, and Cree residents from the other side of the river only came to town if they needed to shop, have a drink, or see a movie, in which case they were forced to sit in designated areas. Racism may have been a fact of life during this period, but when a First Nations teen was raped and murdered in The Pas over thirty years ago, a new level of hatred and distrust became a reality. Jack Stackhouse, writer for the Globe & Mail, called the crime “one of the darkest periods for race relations in modern Canadian history.” It took ten years before her attackers were found guilty of the crime.

Although the new franchise appears to have healed some wounds between the communities, just

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62 Ibid., 69.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Boyd, All Roads Lead to Hockey, 49.
70 Boyd, All Roads Lead to Hockey, 49.
as in Holman, not everyone in The Pas believes that competitive hockey has been a positive thing for the community. The family of a local Cree hockey player named Perry Young believed that the youth committed suicide because of the junior hockey team. Stackhouse reported that while Young was still playing for the Blizzard, he began to lose ice time. Accused of racism, Coach Kerry Clark explained to OCN’s board that Young was arriving late for practices, at times still hung over. Two months later, Perry quit going to practice completely and the coach kicked him off the team. At a community meeting Clark was accused of being a racist; however, most of the community supported him. They wanted to continue seeing their team beat the other white teams around Manitoba, and that meant putting the best talent on the ice. Months later, Perry committed suicide. Perry’s mother claimed that “hockey’s highly competitive white system…[was ignoring] many of the problems Native youngsters must face.” She was probably right. The OCN had bought a business, and they wanted the most competitive team out on the ice. Her son was not the only Aboriginal hockey player to see his dreams of making the NHL fall apart.

In 2002, Terence Tootoo, the older brother of Jordin Tootoo, the first Inuit player to make the National Hockey League (NHL), also killed himself. His suicide took place on the same day he received a drunk driving charge. Terrence was playing with Roanoke of the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL) at the time. His brief suicide note indirectly referred to hockey, as he encouraged his brother: “Do well, Jor. Go all the way.” Greg Hunter, an assistant coach with the Blizzard, recalled talking with Terence at a hockey school the year before he died. Terence

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71 Ibid., 50.
73 Boyd, All Roads Lead to Hockey, 50.
74 Ibid.
had mentioned that he was looking forward to going back to Roanoke. Hunter added, “You know he was assistant captain there his first year? He was a wonderful guy.” In an interview with Blizzard players a year before Terence’s tragic death in 2001, Terence had explained that Aboriginal kids had to be tough if they wanted to play professional hockey. Ironically, he had also confided that he had “no respect for those kids who just give up….I see those guys when I go home for the summer and they’re doing nothing. If you give up, you’ll be a nobody.”

While hockey may provide hope for the future as well as increased self-esteem and social skills for many players, the danger is that some Aboriginal youth with dreams of stardom and a better life may be unable to cope with the consequences of failure. Many Aboriginal communities are reeling under the weight of high unemployment and a horde of other serious social problems, and options for youth are extremely limited. Pat Personius, a Cree elder on the OCN board, did not deny that Native youth are under a lot of pressure, warning parents of hockey players to make sure their kids keep the curfew and stay out of trouble: “Kids start fooling around, and soon you got [sic] nothing.” He also stressed how important the Blizzard players were as role models to other Cree children growing up on the OCN.

Aboriginal players face other difficulties when they play competitive hockey. According to Stackhouse, many Aboriginal hockey players stop playing hockey during Midget because they have to leave behind a close-knit, isolated community. Depending on where they play competitive hockey, they can experience culture shock as well, something most non-Aboriginal players do not have to deal with to the same extent. Unfortunately, many Aboriginal athletes

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76 Boyd, *All Roads Lead to Hockey*, 50.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 51-52.
“are sucked back to subsistence-level life on the reservation by the vacuum recreated by inadequate education and readily available escapes like drugs and alcohol.” 83 Life is extremely difficult for Aboriginal youth growing up on reserves.

Unlike in the far north, where the Inuit population makes up a large part of the population, racism is often a problem for Aboriginal players who play in southern Canada and the United States. 84 There are many Canadians who think that racial oppression only occurs in the southern United States, and they “dismiss any contemporary racial incidents as nothing but aberrations in an essentially peaceful, tolerant, charitable, and egalitarian nation.” 85 Many Blizzard players would disagree. The first year the Blizzard were formed, the team carried 16 Aboriginal players on the roster; it was then that “the players discovered how some Prairie people really feel. On road trips, they were jeered as ‘welfare bums’ and ‘drunks.’ In one arena, security guards were stationed in the sections where Blizzard fans sat.” 86 Aaron Starr of the Blizzard reported that “he still occasionally hears racist remarks from some fans, but not from opposing players.” 87 He remembered that in one town fans threw Lysol on the ice, implying that the Aboriginal players were alcoholics. On a different occasion, pamphlets full of racial insults were left for Aboriginal players on the team bus. 88 Sadly, such accounts of racial abuse are a part Canada’s hockey history; however, the experiences of Aboriginal athletes have often been excluded from the historical record. This exclusion must come to an end.

84 Boyd, All Roads Lead to Hockey, 58.
87 Boyd, All Roads Lead to Hockey, 58.
88 Ibid., 58.
According to Mary Louise Adams, “the national community imagined through stories about hockey is a racialized community.”89 Even though there have been many stories written about hockey, black and Aboriginal people have been marginalized in the media. When The Globe and Mail featured an article on “Canada’s Captain,” the black Calgary Flames forward Jarome Iginla, the fact that he was the first black captain in NHL history was somehow ignored. Although the article discussed the possibility of Iginla being the “new face” of the NHL, the only mention of race came from a quote from Iginla, who admitted that other black players had inspired him to continue to work towards his goal of playing hockey in the NHL (there were only fourteen players out of six hundred that were black in 2002-03). He had also remarked that he had often been the only black player on the minor hockey teams that he had been a part of, yet nothing was written in response to his comments.90 The virtual silence in the media concerning stories of Aboriginal and black hockey players in the hockey world seems to illustrate “the distance hockey needs to travel to reflect the national community from which it draws – and which the game is supposed to symbolize.”91

Victoria Paraschak is another scholar who believes that it is important that the experiences of athletes belonging to minority groups be told. She has argued that it is time for First Nation, Inuit, and Métis men and women who have competed, or are currently competing in mainstream sporting events, to be included in Canadian historical accounts. Canadians need to have an accurate record of the sports history of Canada, and such a record is also valuable for Aboriginal peoples, who take great pride in the successes of their athletes. Traditional sports and

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91 Ibid., 75.
games should also be included in Canada’s sports history record. By including such events in historical accounts, non-Aboriginal Canadians may become “more capable of understanding themselves if they can compare and contrast themselves with others.” Differences are certainly evident between the following Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities who play hockey in southern Alberta.

The Blood Reserve at Kainaiwa or Kainai is the largest in Canada. The hockey arena is located at Standoff, the only town on the reserve. The Kainai are isolated from other southern Alberta communities geographically as well as in other ways; at this reserve, “the rate of poverty is significantly higher than in the rest of Alberta, and the suicide rate, mortality rate, life expectancy, birth weight, and congenital disease statistics compare unfavorably with national averages.” While researching the Kainai Braves, a senior men’s team, Michael A. Robidoux discovered that Kainai minor hockey teams had been banned from the Foothills Minor Hockey League (FMHL) in 2001 (although the best players had been allowed to join other local teams). This meant that 250 children from Kainai were not able to play organized hockey with other local community children. While it was acknowledged by the new Kainai recreation director that some of the charges against the Kainai Minor Hockey Association (KMHA) were legitimate, even after making organizational improvements, the KMHA had not been allowed explain the changes they had made and make a case for their reinstatement to either the FMHL or the Lethbridge Minor Hockey Association. After reading the records and talking with the (new) Recreation Coordinator, Robidoux ascertained that the 19 parents who had written angry letters

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93 Paraschak, “Native Sport History,” 63.
to the FMHL did not feel that their children were safe when playing against Kainai players.

There were accusations made against Kainai players that involved players, referees, and coaches. Kainai players were accused of being unsportsmanlike and their parents were said to be too aggressive. 96 Other letters described the reserve as being a dangerous place, and the First Nations people “villainous, wild, and uncivilized.” 97 Is racism at the heart of these comments?

Interestingly, Robidoux had been in southern Alberta a year after the ban in 2002, researching non-First Nations minor hockey teams. He had observed at that time that there were high levels of aggression in the stands as well as on the ice. 98 Robidoux concluded that the aggressive behavior seemed to be accepted by the community as being a normal occurrence “and an inevitable consequence of the game. Spectators, players, coaches, and referees contribute to these attitudes through their words, their actions, and their complicitous responses, which reinforces the legitimacy of these behaviors, producing…a culture of violence.” 99 This “culture of violence” certainly seems to have contributed to the tension between the Kainai and their non-First Nation neighbors.

In a letter written by a First Nations woman to the Aboriginal Youth Network News, the hockey wife and mother complained about the racism in hockey. She contended that she commonly heard both fans and players saying things like “go back to the Reserve…wagon burners…dirty Indians…savages.” 100 She believed the terms were used to “entice conflict. This is not to say that the Native teams avoid confrontation, but the racial remarks help to provoke it.

In Killum, [sic] the senior hockey league has a team called ‘Killum [sic] Indians.’ What is the

96 Ibid., 289-91.
97 Ibid., 292.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
message there?"101 (It should be noted that this senior men’s team with the inflammatory racist name is no longer playing hockey.)102 The fact that the residents of Killam had no problem with the name of the men’s team seems to suggest that racism was acceptable to its residents.

After reading all of the letters and documentation, Robidoux concluded that the letters seemed to be a “racialized discourse of the ‘other.’”103 If it is true that sports are “experienced as a naturalized expression of self, group, and culture,”104 we should not be surprised that there are differences in the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal hockey teams play hockey. Robidoux noted such differences when he first began to study First Nations hockey. Interestingly, while in northern Ontario to watch the Nishnawbe, Ojibway-Cree, and Cree play hockey, he noted that there were “numerous incidents where players would receive incredible physical blows, whether through body contact or through contact with the stick, which in Euro-Canadian contexts typically leads to some kind of retaliatory gesture, if not an actual physical fight.”105 At the games Robidoux observed, immediate “retaliatory gestures…were rare to non-existent. Instead players would often smile or even laugh after receiving blows.”106 Many non-Aboriginal Canadians believe that their way of playing hockey (including a display of fisticuffs) is the correct way to play hockey, whereas the violence of First Nations players and fans is unacceptable. In southern Alberta, Kainai players and fans were “deviant, dangerous, and unwanted.”107 This labeling of the “other” only exacerbates any tension and distrust that may exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teams.

101 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 296.
106 Ibid., 131.
While the children and parents involved in Foothills Minor Hockey were not adversely affected by the absence of the Kainai teams, the same cannot be said for Kainai youth. According to Robidoux, the conflict has “caused a great deal of anger and resentment on the part of the people of Kainai and other First Nations in Alberta.” The exclusionary action on the part of FMHA was certainly divisive. In this part of the province, hockey has not been a unifying force, but has only produced “more barriers to intercultural growth and empathy,…[increased] stigmatization of the other and [created] a further imbalance of power…[leading to] the ultimate ghettoization of First Nations hockey players in the region.”

These are strong words, and perhaps deservedly so, as at least four years passed before organized minor hockey was again being played in the hockey arena at Standoff. Currently the Lethbridge Minor Hockey Association website lists five Kainai teams. Minor hockey teams from Claresholm are now playing in the Central Alberta Hockey League along with teams from the Siksika reserve. It is doubtful that competitive hockey, due to its violent and aggressive nature, will ever be the best way to draw Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities together when they are on opposing teams. In such cases, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities across Canada will have to find other ways to bridge the gap that often separates them.

It seems undeniable that many Aboriginal communities are actively “using hockey to build a sense of pride and accomplishment that extends beyond the game….Entire villages – from babies to elders – travel to tournaments by car or even plane to cheer on their teams.”

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108 Ibid., 297.
109 Ibid., 299-300.
According to Robidoux, “arenas are packed….Even at the local level, players are treated like stars, so hockey has become an important way for young people, especially young men, to be part of something positive.”\textsuperscript{113} Even though he only played a few games for the Chicago Blackhawks, Freddie Sasaskamoose’s sister-in-law stated that Freddie was seen as “a star….We didn’t think of him as quite human….To Indian people he was the equivalent of Elvis Presley….he was a role model for young people.”\textsuperscript{114} The Vuntut Gwitchin of the Yukon has recognized that the game of hockey could assist the youth in their community to develop in important ways. Their website states that:

> It is the community's wish to nurture the value that sports like hockey do for the individual soul in the sense of accomplishment, self confidence, leadership and success that helps build confident young citizens. When the community…[builds] the new recreation complex there is no doubt magical things will happen, so look out and heads up hockey world!\textsuperscript{115}

While many First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples have welcomed the game of hockey into their lives, they are also working to incorporate their own cultural traditions into the activity at the same time. Is hockey being used by Aboriginal communities to resist Euro-Canadian sport values? Anthropologists have found that “cultural boundaries are maintained and fortified despite high levels of interethnic contact.”\textsuperscript{116} This certainly seems to have been the case for Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. “Resistance” to mainstream sport values may be taking place through the Aboriginal Sports Circle (ASC), formed to help develop and run sport and recreation programs for Aboriginal Peoples. The ASC, partners with the National Aboriginal Hockey Championship (NAHC), a tournament for elite Bantam and Midget First Nation (status and non-
status Indian), Inuit, and Métis players. According to the website of the ASC, the event will “take a balanced approach that supports the physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural aspects of life...[and] will include the meaningful involvement of Elders and cultural components throughout the program.” The ASC wants to ensure that Aboriginal hockey events include a holistic component traditionally important to Aboriginal peoples across Canada.

Similarly, the Little NHL (Native Hockey League) is another annual tournament where Aboriginal youth gather from communities throughout the province of Ontario to play hockey. The tournament has grown from 16 teams in 1971 to 93 teams in 2007. Co-founder Earl Abotossoway insisted that the tournament was not just about competing or about hockey in particular – the educational aspect of the experience was key in his view. Learning about other cultures and making new friends was considered to be just as important as hockey for the children attending the tournament. The opening ceremonies included Aboriginal dancers and drew thousands of spectators, parents, and players to the Sudbury hockey arena. Once again, it can be seen that Aboriginal communities are shaping their own hockey “experience.”

Marks asserted that every NHL player he interviewed believed that special programs for Natives were vital. The main reason that programs are needed is because of the poverty that exists on most reserves. Hockey is an expensive sport to play and many “low income parents simply cannot afford to pay for the equipment, uniforms, ice times, referees, registration and travel costs, which were estimated at $5,000 per season per child in 2008. Often Native children are unable to play organized hockey, even recreational hockey, simply because of the cost.”

118 Ibid.
120 Marks, They Call Me Chief, 229.
121 Ibid.
In many cases, First Nations communities struggle just to provide decent “housing, clean water, sewage treatment, roads and other community-wide needs. Recreation has long been a luxury in First Nations communities.”\textsuperscript{122} Climate is a problem that is often unique for Aboriginal communities located in the northern reaches of Canada; for those who do not have an indoor arena, it can get too cold to play outside for long (if at all). The scarcity of trained coaches who understand Native culture is problematic as well. Funds are needed so that these teachers can have proper training.\textsuperscript{123} Freddie Sasaskamoose described the difficulty of moving from an isolated rural reserve to a large city, as well as the loneliness he experienced.\textsuperscript{124}

Racism may also play a large part in discouraging some Native players from playing competitively. Sheldon Souray, a defenseman currently playing for the Edmonton Oilers, recalled a coach in junior A who told him that he would never play professionally and even called him a “dumb Indian.”\textsuperscript{125} Ted Nolan, a former NHL coach, contended that Aboriginal children who are competing for spots on triple-A teams must not only prove to coaching staff that they are skilled players – they must also prove that they are \textit{better} than everyone else to make these teams, something many of the other interviewed players concurred with.\textsuperscript{126} Kevin Simpson, studying racism involving Indian athletes in the United States, contended that while many athletes believed that white coaches were often biased against them, they rarely gave the particulars of actual incidents.\textsuperscript{127} Nevertheless, Simpson believed that there was a \textit{perception} among Indian athletes that racism existed, and that this belief was “passed down among the

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{126} Marks, \textit{They Call Me Chief}, 230.
\textsuperscript{127} Simpson, “Sporting Dreams Die,” 263.
athletes almost as an oral tradition."\textsuperscript{128} It is also possible that actions perceived as racism by Aboriginal players may simply be the reluctance of coaches to invest time and energy to develop players that have a higher chance of quitting a team than non-Aboriginal players due to factors that have been discussed above. Simpson asserted in his article that many college coaches in the United States believe (often due to their own experiences) that Indian athletes are “high-risk recruits who probably won’t stick around for more than a few weeks.”\textsuperscript{129} A similar mindset may exist in Canada; such a perception would definitively illustrate that Aboriginal youth are in need of assistance if they are to achieve success playing competitive hockey.

Aboriginal athletes have also had an opportunity to share what they perceive are the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal youth when it comes to participating in sports. A recent Canadian study involving 23 elite Aboriginal athletes from 3 provinces and 7 different sports (including hockey) found that along with the challenges of moving away from family and friends and learning to integrate with non-Aboriginals, there are a lack of opportunities to play sports on reserves:

With native athletes, the biggest thing is getting them off the reserve to realize what’s out there for them as athletes…Not saying it’s a bad thing to be on the reserve, but they’re not going to school by the age of 14 to 16, and often they’re into tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. You can succeed out there and still have that tie.\textsuperscript{130}

In addition, most of the athletes believed that holistic development was crucial. This sort of training would include “providing support beyond sport, encouraging persistence, and

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 263.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 261.
developing meaningful coach-athlete relations.”131 The emphasis on developing well-rounded individuals generally seems to be an important goal for Aboriginal peoples.

The Government of Canada has admitted that Aboriginal communities face serious challenges. The Canadian Heritage website stated that that Aboriginal people have economic barriers that prevent them from playing sports that include fees, equipment, and travel costs. There need for trained coaches who understand Aboriginal culture was acknowledged, along with the negative effects of racism.132 The government has also recognized “the power of sport to improve the lives of Aboriginal Peoples. Indeed, sport has long been recognized by Aboriginal Peoples across Canada as a means to combat some of the negative factors affecting Aboriginal communities, in particular those affecting their youth.”133 The government has also acknowledged that First Nations peoples have an important holistic approach to sport that “emphasizes the development of the whole person, balancing the physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life.”134 Whether or not the Canadian Sport Policy will translate into actual changes is another question.

Ironically, where hockey was once employed by European colonizers in an attempt to stamp out the culture of Aboriginal peoples, the game of hockey is now being re-imagined by Aboriginal communities across Canada in an attempt to regain their traditional customs, unify their communities, and provide opportunities for their children to gain self-esteem and hope for a brighter future. Unfortunately, hockey has also impacted Aboriginal communities in negative ways, as issues such as poverty; inadequate coaching, racism, and culture shock continue to

131 Blodgett et al, “From Practice to Praxis,” 401.
133 “Sport Canada’s Policy,” Canadian Heritage, under 1.3 Scope.
134 “Sport Canada’s Policy,” Canadian Heritage, under 1.4 Sport and Aboriginal People, Canadian Heritage.
challenge Aboriginal leaders who are trying to help communities that are under siege. So what does hockey mean for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people across Canada today? As Richard Gruneau and David Whitson related, “hockey has always had a range of different meanings and intended uses for various groups in Canada.”

Aboriginal peoples continue to shape the game of hockey in various ways that suit their own needs and desires. Acts of “resistance” have included the creation of a national sports council, various Native-only sporting events, and even a junior hockey team. While the game of hockey provides an opportunity to achieve unity and hope to Aboriginal communities and feelings of self-esteem and personal success to their youth, many communities are still struggling to ensure that their children have an opportunity to play competitive (or even organized hockey) due to racism, socio-economic factors, geography, and a lack of training for Aboriginal coaches. While Canada’s national sport can hardly be claimed to be a unifying force (as can be seen in Kainai, and to a lesser extent in Holman), the experiences of the two different communities living on each side of a river in Manitoba has clearly demonstrated that hockey has the potential to draw people together – even two hostile and angry communities with very different cultures. Unfortunately, very few Aboriginal communities will ever receive the kind of monetary settlement that the OCN received that put them on equal footing with their The Pas neighbors and gave them the long-awaited opportunity to make their own decisions about what was best for their own people.

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Bibliography


