American Indian Sport History

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American Indian Sport History

This chapter traces the history of sport in Indigenous contexts in the lands that became the United States. The chapter surveys Indigenous sports including lacrosse, shinny, and double-ball before highlighting tribal investment in running and horse-racing. The chapter identifies how sports connects to Indigenous religious, political, and communal practices. It then highlights the impact of colonization and the boarding school movements on Indigenous sports. It suggests that baseball, basketball, and football were sites of resistance for Native athletes who used them as sites of community, opportunity, and resistance to forces of assimilation and modernity. This is expanded through an examination of Kanaka Maoli surfing and canoeing as well as the development of games in Native Alaska that mimic traditional survival skills. The chapter closes by briefly identifying the challenges that contemporary Native athletes face as well as how Indigenous sport contributes to decolonization.

Keywords: sport history, Indigenous, Native America, colonization, games

More often than not, the history of sport in what became the United States of America begins in the colonial period of the 18th century with games of chance, horseracing, cockfighting, and other leisurely pursuits.1 These “modern” sports were governed by organized rules and parameters including specialized roles, uniforms, publication of results, and record keeping, particularly for national competitions.2 Swimming, cycling, and golf were modern as were the newer sports of baseball, basketball, and American football that would rise to public attention in

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the 19th and early 20th century. What was not modern were Indigenous sporting histories that existed both well before contact and that would evolve through their incorporation with British, French, Spanish, and finally American sporting traditions. Dissolving the use of “modern” and its associated focus on competitive sport as intrinsic to sporting history allows us to challenge dominant narratives that tie sporting culture to modernity, capitalism, consumption, regulation, and the colonial and imperial aims of Western Europe. One of the continuing effects of this tie is the preferential status of competitive sports like baseball, basketball, and football that were forced upon Native students, athletes, and communities. Lesser known sports as well as those with fewer professional opportunities have been overshadowed by considerations of how Natives fit into “the big three”. Instead, this chapter demonstrates that expressions of religious, cultural, and communal ways of knowing through sport allowed Indigenous peoples the space to articulate their own worldview.

Sports, be they games of wagering, chance, or physical activity, were enmeshed in Indigenous tradition, ritual, and ceremony. As early as 1636, Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf noted that the games of cross [lacrosse], dish, and straw, were ordered by Wyandot-Huron tribal healers to assist sick individuals in regaining their health. Players participated in ceremonial cleansings led by tribal leaders who would consecrate the playing field, the equipment, and serve as arbitrators of any game disputes. Tribal leaders would also determine the rules and equipment uses for male and female players which sometimes differed. For example, Cherokee women played the game with their hands, rather than sticks as did Shawnee women. Variations of

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4 Vennum, American Indian Lacrosse, 185.
lacrosse abounded with men dominating play in some communities and women participating in others: the Onandaga played dehunshegawaes (“they hit a round object”); the Ojibwe played bagaa’atowe (“they hit something”); the Potawatomi played lacrosse as did Kasaskia Illinois peoples and also Plains Cree and Nippising north of what would become the US national border.\(^5\) Cayuga Haudenosaunee would play the “Creator’s Game” and tie its existence to the creation of Turtle Island and the founding of the nation by Sky Woman, Hadoui, and other pivotal spiritual ancestors.\(^6\) Its importance remains as the Haudenosaunee-Iroquois are consistently ranked in the top five teams in the world in lacrosse. In 2022, they will compete in the World Games despite being denied a place in the tournament by officials who do not recognize the team as a sovereign nation.

Lacrosse games historically were hosted to honor the dead, encourage fertility, and as signs of faith to placate spirits. Betting with beaver robes, porcelain collars, and other goods, clans would compete against one another not only for victory but also to gain favor for their family and village.\(^7\) Games could demonstrate friendship between communities visiting for council or they could be used to settle disputes. They also served as training for war and even a distraction. Winnebago players, for example, would share their successes in war before play to intimidate opponents.\(^8\) In 1763, Ojibwe players invited British troops at Fort Michilimacinac [now Fort Mackinac] to watch a game of lacrosse. They used play to disguise warriors who rushed the gates and overwhelmed British troops securing use of the fort as they fought against

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\(^8\) Ibid.
colonial invaders. Despite interest in the game of lacrosse and other Indigenous sports, Western colonizers often lamented that Indigenous peoples’ play did not conform to Western value systems. The religious rituals associated with sport were perceived as forms of paganism. Women were not supposed to exert themselves in mixed-gender company. Gambling was certainly never to be allowed.

Lacrosse was not the only game that interested Natives. René Goulaine de Laudonnière recorded the Timucua playing a game where they lobbed a ball into a reed mat placed atop a tree in the 1560s. Mississippian Natives played chunky, which involved rolling a disk or hoop across a playing field in the 15th and 16th centuries. Native communities also played shinny, a ball and stick game with the main objective to get the ball in the opponent’s goal. The size of the playing field and materials used to create the sticks and balls varied; some played the game on ice while others used level ground as a playing field. Players could hit, or even kick the ball, but could not use their hands in any way. Although not as elaborately religious as lacrosse, shinny still operated as an important community ritual. The Makah, for example, celebrated the successful capture of a whale that would feed and support community survival with a game of shinny.

Shinny crossed racial and gender divisions: soldiers in the American Revolution played shinny at camp; enslaved children on South Carolina plantations played shinny prior to the Civil War. It could be played against other Native women, against Indigenous men, or both.

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displaces basketball or baseball which most sport historians credit as being the first organized women’s sports in the US; Native women enjoyed far greater access to athletic opportunities than their white counterparts who were constrained by Protestant gender norms. Unmarried women could play double-ball where two balls tied together with a string where thrown and caught upon a stick, scoring points against one’s opponents. They could also compete in games like kicking the ball which Crow woman Pretty Shield remembered playing with her female friends growing up.\(^{12}\) Despite these opportunities for Indigenous women, the sports Indigenous women played have long been underexplored by scholars, particularly those prior to the 20\(^{th}\) century. In part, this is a function of contemporary archival practices that have preserved written and photographic evidence from boarding schools, colleges and universities, and progressive organizations. Much less attention has been payed to pre-20\(^{th}\) century sports that require navigating oral histories, physical artifacts, and other generational forms of knowledge transfer in Indigenous communities.

Along with these ball games, Native communities also organized around physical activities like running and horseracing. Seneca Louis “Deerfoot” Bennett would gain international recognition in the 1850s and 1860s as a competitive runner.\(^{13}\) Pawnee Big Hawk Chief would, in 1876, run the world’s first recorded (but unofficial) sub-four-minute mile at the Sidney Army Barracks in Nebraska. Narragansett Ellison Brown Sr. won the Boston Marathon in both 1936 and 1939, challenging detractors who had panned his withdrawal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a result of injury. Oglala Lakota Tamakoce Te’Hila [Billy Mills] would become the first Native to win the 10,000-meter run at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics drawing on the training


\(^{13}\) Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*. 
he’d received at Haskell Institute and the University of Kansas. Running was a not just individual, it was also a matter of tribal identity. Historian Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert eloquently documents the significance of running within the Hopi Nation, stating, “since the beginning of Hopi time, Hopis have been in a constant state of movement to and away from home.”

For the Hopi, running was not just a sport that relied on fixed times and lengths of runs—it was and remains a significant cultural practice that underlines Hopi ways of knowing and being. Running in this manner often confounded white sportsmen who viewed the sport of running as requiring a finish line and a clear, sole winner. This ideology was on full display during the 1904 Anthropology Days in St. Louis, Missouri where white anthropologists devised a number of athletic competitions for Indigenous peoples participating in the World’s Fair.

When, during a footrace, the athletes waited to cross the finish line together, director of Physical Culture James Sullivan attributed this practice to a sign of mental weakness rather than recognizing an alternative conception of running. Natives, particularly those who lived within the U.S. Plains and the Southwest, turned to running and horse-racing as both a sport and as a means of survival. Shoshone, Bannock, Crow, Ute, Diné, and other Native peoples acquired horses from Spanish colonizers reinvigorating the horse-trading network that had arisen prior to the 18th century in the lands that would become Mexico. Pi-Kániwa (Piegan Blackfoot), Gros Venture, and Apache participated in horse races between tribal communities, including those

hostile to one another. Spiritual ceremony including protective medicines would be utilized to enhance both the horse’s performance and that of its rider as well as to guard against those who might wish the horse or rider harm. Warfare was also tied to horse-racing as men, including race attendees, would boast of their prowess at war before and during races. Racehorses themselves were also valuable commodities that were carefully protected. Acquiring a racehorse through raiding was considered an impressive feat. Despite the suppression of horse-racing and its associated betting by colonizers, its importance to Native communities remained consistent historically. It was incorporated into Independence Day festivals, Native fairs, and other communal events like rodeo.\(^{17}\) Today’s Indian Relay competitions serves as a modern manifestation of this historical ritual.\(^{18}\) Competitors often connect their own sporting experience to those of tribal or familiar elders. This acts as an expression of both cultural continuity and Indigenous agency. Participating is a way to honor one’s history and one’s community.

When the Office of Indian Affairs (later known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs) started constructing off-reservation Native American boarding schools in the latter half of the 19th century, sports emerged as curricular focal point. U.S. administrators were guided by Progressives who believed sports could assist with assimilation activities within Native communities.\(^{19}\) The athletic cultures created and fostered at Native boarding schools permeated the boundaries of the schools. It provided a literal training ground for Native athletes who would find success in professional sports of running, boxing, baseball, and football.\(^{20}\) Sport offered the opportunity for athletes to support themselves and their communities. It provided community

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{19}\) John Bloom, \textit{To Show What An Indian Can Do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
\(^{20}\) Philip J. Deloria, \textit{Indians in Unexpected Places} (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 128.
where colonialism impinged on Native life. It also, dependent on the sport, was met with
Native student’s own belief systems about which sports were appropriate based on gender.
Tennis, for example, was not embraced by male students at the Cherokee Seminary as they felt it
a “sissy” sport that violated their own sense of gender roles.

Football, arguably the most well-known sport that Natives participated in, began at the
Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1893. It was not until Superintendent Richard Henry Pratt
hired famous football coach Glenn “Pop” Warner in 1899 that football would become
synonymous with Carlisle. Seneca Bemus Pierce (1894-1898), Laguna Pueblan Frank Hudson
(1895-1899; first all-American and one of the first non-white coaches in college football),
Oneida Martin Wheelock (1894-1902), and Stockbridge-Munsee Jimmy Johnson (1899-1903)
each contributed to the Carlisle teams along with Albert Exendine (Delaware) and Gus Welch
(Chippewa). Sac and Fox athlete Jim Thorpe would letter in track and field, football, baseball,
and lacrosse. A two-time all-American, Olympic gold medalist, professional football hall of
fame inductee, and professional baseball player, Thorpe was voted greatest athlete of the first
half of the 20th century by sportswriters and broadcasters. Often dubbed the “Carlisle of the
West,” Haskell Institute, one of the nation’s largest Native American boarding schools located in
Lawrence, Kansas was also renowned for its football program. The game generated inter-tribal
relations and solidarity amongst athletes and their Native fans. While school officials and
administrators within the Bureau of Indian Affairs used sport as a tool for assimilation and U.S.
citizenship training, Native athletes engaged in sport to escape the harsh realities of the boarding

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21 Beth Eby, “Building Bodies, (Un)Making Empire: Gender, Sport, and Colonialism in the United States, 1880-1930” (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019), http://hdl.handle.net/2142/105606.
school setting. Boarding school sport histories are a particularly rich vein of Indigenous sporting history. Boarding school archives offer significant archival collections around sport including Native letters, diaries, and publications where Native athletes expressed their own ways of understanding sport. Importantly, though, like all archival holdings tied to the settler-colonial state, we must understand the complexity of those records. While students might express joy at the sporting opportunities, it was also a form of coercive activity that inserted non-Indigenous values and ways of play into Native worldviews.

Carlisle and Haskell were not the only boarding schools who encouraged sport as a means of “civilizing” Native students. Hopi students who attended Sherman Institute in Riverside, California participated in track and cross country. Hopi runner Louis Tewanima would participate in both the 1908 and 1912 Olympics, garnering silver in the 1912 10,000-meter event. Women at the Fort Shaw Indian School competed in, and won, the women’s basketball tournament at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. Basketball, which could be played indoors during

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the winter, had been introduced to the Montana school after student Josephine Langley visited Carlisle. Just a little over a decade old, their exhibition games at the Fair not only generated significant public interest, it also allowed the women to demonstrate their physical abilities. They played full court, twenty-minute halves, with no timeouts—rules that were used by their male counterparts unlike the modified game played by white women.25 Like the women’s team at Fort Shaw, Haskell women basketballers competed against local colleges, high schools, and Young Women’s Christian Association teams, affording the students the chance to travel to and from school grounds (a privilege often afforded few students). References to women’s basketball appear with relative frequency within Native newspapers. Students often wrote home to family members about their passion for the new sport. Sports at Native boarding schools served anticolonial purposes by allowing them a measure of community and autonomy that they would not have had otherwise. Sport allowed them to travel locally, regionally, and in some cases nationally. It also allowed them time set aside from the strict authoritarian rules of Superintendents and other white administrators. Yet, these moments of joy were tempered by the reality that many Natives had been torn from their families and communities and forced into a coercive system of education that was dehumanizing.

The opportunities of Native sport were further mitigated by the rampant discrimination athletes faced.26 Racial sensationalism from sportswriters captured the football and baseball games as battles between Indian “savages” seeking revenge against civilized whites. Fans lamented that the athletes looked too much like their own [white] boys with their short hair,

trousers, and lack of face paint or war bonnets. They were also held to standards of
sportsmanship and decorum on the field and off that were not shared by their white counterparts.
Native players were treated as objects of curiosity that reinforced stereotypes of Indian peoples.
Penobscot Louis Sockalexis would debut for Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Spiders in
October 1871 after attending the College of the Holy Cross and Notre Dame University. Six
years later, Sporting Life recorded that Sockalexis’ taking the field was greeted with “war
whoops, yells of derision….and demonstrations border[ing] on extreme rudeness.”27 These
taunts echoed those heard by minor league Native player Sioux Henry Legg whose manager
invented a mock-Sioux name for him in the Central State league, “Rats-in-the-Garrett.”28 This
racism would contribute to twentieth century mascot movements that depicted racist stereotypes
of Indians.29 Beginning in the late 1920s, colleges, universities, and professional teams would
develop Indian-themed athletic brands that drew on colonial tropes of conquest and subjugation.
Using headdresses, breech clothes, feathered capes, and other supposedly Native imagery, white
institutions would reenact stereotypes of Indians. This would include war whoops, quasi-fancy
dancing, and the adoption of music that composers believed best represented Indian life.
Drawing vaudeville performances as well as fictional narratives of American conquest, Native
mascots served as a primary site of how sporting fans learned about Indians. Importantly, this
was supported by cultural organizations including the Boy Scouts of America, the Young Men’s
Christian Association, and other social groups who inculcated young white men and women with
stories of success through American conquest. Importantly, beginning in 1971, Native students

27 Jeffrey P. Powers-Beck, The American Indian Integration of Baseball (Lincoln, NE: University of
Nebraska Press, 2004).
28 Ibid.
29 Jennifer Guiliano, Indian Spectacle: College Mascots and the Anxiety of Modern America, Critical
and activists would begin an almost six-decade long battle to prohibit the use of these by college and professional teams.

Seneca Jacob Jameson would lead more than a dozen other Carlisle baseball players into the Major league including Chippewa-Ojibwe pitcher Charles Bender, Thorpe, Stockbridge-Munsee Louis Leroy, Cheyenne Michael Balenti, Ojibwe Frank Jude and Charles Roy, and Ho-Chunk Winnebago George H. Johnson.\textsuperscript{30} Still more boarding school baseball players from Haskell Institute, Chilocco Indian School, Flandreau, Sante Fe, and others would actively participate in major, minor league, and collegiate baseball. The lure of baseball, with its regular income as well as the opportunities for education and career, encouraged the participation of Native athletes. Charles Bender, for example, would coach the Chicago White Sox (1925-1926), the US Naval Academy (1924-1928), and the Philadelphia Athletics where he scouted and managed their minor league team. Charles Mayo Guzon, graduate of Carlisle, would use his baseball experience as a minor league player to serve as the first Native umpire before joining the A.G. Spaulding Company as a regional director for sales. Like lacrosse and other ball games, baseball would serve individual and communal purposes. The Wabanaki, for example, hosted their own tribal league play from the 1890s through the 1940s. It served as a means of generational transmission with MicMac language rules, musical performances, and gender roles as fathers trained their sons to play.\textsuperscript{31} While baseball and football began as white men’s games, Native communities adapted the culture of sport to support their own cultural and social survival.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Powers-Beck, \textit{The American Indian Integration of Baseball}.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Another example of Native cooption of colonial sport contemporarily is Douglas Miles and his Apache Skateboards Company. For more on Miles and Native relationships to Skateboarding, see David Martinez, “From Off the Rez to Off the Hook!: Douglas Miles and Apache Skateboards,” \textit{American Indian Quarterly} 37, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 370-394.
The dominance of boarding schools and the associated sports of baseball and football have overshadowed other sporting histories in the early to mid-twentieth century. While Native men adapted baseball and football, Native women developed their own sporting experiences that were tied to their own sense of community identity. Navajo women embraced basketball in the early 1920s well before Church of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) missionaries brought the game to the reservation in the 1940s. Lillian Nelson would play the game with her friends at both the Shiprock and the Riverside boarding schools. Her daughter Georgia would play for the Shiprock Cardinals, a team that would collect over a thousand trophies in state, regional, and national tournaments from the 1960s to the 1980s. Reservation basketball would take on a decidedly different tone than games played under the control of boarding school and missionary officials. Clandestine games were an opportunity to shed the rules of play enforced on Native students. “Rez ball”, a style of basketball noted for its up tempo style of play where every player is treated as a shooting threat, likely draws its origins from unsupervised games held by students at boarding schools. Shoni Shimmel (Umatilla), Tahnee Robinson (Northern Cheyanne), Angel Goodrich (Cherokee) would participate in Rez ball prior to their careers in collegiate and professional women’s basketball. They followed in the footsteps of Ryneldi Becenti (Navajo), who was the first Native American athlete to play in the Women’s Basketball Association. Rez ball games are accompanied by communal meals, spiritual rituals, and large-scale crowds that resonate with tribal identity. Importantly, it is not only youth play where basketball has flourished on reservations; many hosted adult leagues where tribal elders could compete.

Native communities off the mainland participated in their own sporting experiences. Kanaka Maoli Duke Paoa Kahanamoku popularized the Hawaiian sport of He‘e nalu (surfing). He‘e nalu was an expression of the kapu system of political and religious structures that organized Indigenous life. Commoners could not surf with tribal chiefs, certain surf breaks were reserved for royalty, and boards themselves were equated to one’s political and social status.\(^{36}\) Ranking chiefs would compete against one another, demonstrating their knowledge of ocean currents as well as their physical skill. Like indigenous ball games which missionaries and colonizers feared would lead to gambling and laziness, surfing was also perceived by missionaries in the 1820s as potentially corruptive. Despite their prohibition, surfing along with canoeing and hula remained a vital part of Kanaka Maoli culture as it not only served as a form of resistance to white colonizers but also became a way for Native Hawaiians to build industries around tourists who would journey to Hawaii after its annexation. Similarly, Inuit, Iñuiait, Yupik and other Alaska natives would develop their own sporting culture around circumpolar life. Stick pull games simulated common activities in daily life including grabbing a slippery salmon from rushing water (the Indian Stick Pull) and pulling seals from holes in ice (the Eskimo Stick Pull).\(^{37}\) Other games mimicked skills competitors would need to hunt seals, carry animals across long distances as a result of successful hunts, and contests of balance that represented practice needed when moving over ice floes. Dog mushing, cross country and downhill skiing, as well as curling, ice hockey (known as ricket prior to the 18\(^{th}\) century) and other sports appropriate for ice play also encouraged Native athleticism. They also adopted games from the lower forty-eight


including baseball and basketball. These sports tied into, and continue to profit from, tourism efforts.

Indigenous religious, political, and communal practices are enmeshed within sport and as such reveals a richer and more progressive history than its white US counterpart. Native communities were deeply invested in sport as uniquely Indigenous. Even when adopting sports developed by white colonizers, Indigenous communities adapted games to incorporate their own value systems. Dependent on tribe, this could include using one’s Native language to organize play, participating in religious or spiritual ceremonies, incorporating communal knowledge, Native dress, and performance into events surrounding game play. This disruption altered the meaning of sport by co-opting it to fit Indigenous culture and community. That disruption has manifested in a continuing tension between sports as familial, communal, and sacred, and sports as a way for Native athletes to achieve notoriety and opportunity outside of their tribal communities. Contemporaneous athletes who compete professionally often speak of their relationship to sport as generational knowledge transfer. Others, like Madison Hammond (Navajo, San Felipe), note that their success as a professional athlete provides an opportunity for tribal youth to see others with similar backgrounds and experiences succeed.

Centering Indigenous experiences in sport requires the recognition that Native voices and interpretations are silenced in many archival spaces. Archives within the settler-state purview either wholesale fail to incorporate Native experiences and voices or reproduce archival silences by neglecting to challenge dominant discourses around Indigenous sports and athletes. Decolonial approaches might include the incorporation of Native forms of knowledge,

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38 Natalie Michelle Welch, “Completing the Circle: Native American Athletes Giving Back to Their Community” (PhD, University of Tennessee, 2019), https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/5342/.
questioning archival practices and approaches to preserving Native sporting pasts, expanding studies of the relationship between sport and settler-colonialism, and exploring Indigenous resistance and activism. Such an approach should also include contemporary engagement with Native communities and foreground their efforts in furthering Native sporting traditions. Native sport offers the opportunity to consider a variety of structural obligations between Indigenous communities and settler-colonial governments, be they treaty-based, legal, or cultural. There is ample space for scholars to reinterpret colonial records by incorporating Native knowledge and interpretations. This, though, requires recognition that Native ways of knowing may challenge dominant sporting discourses of sports as pleasurable, civilizing, and capitalist. As sport history currently stands, this chapter represents an overview of how sport histories have been expressed in relationship to Indigenous peoples. However, what it also illustrates is a shortcoming within sport history where there is little existing scholarship on the inverse: how is sport transformed by its relationship to Indigeneity? A decolonial approach to US Indigenous sport history might encourage the partnership of sport historians with Indigenous communities to tell their sporting histories. It also might expand its efforts to recruit Indigenous scholars to join the field.

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