

Invisible But Not Absent

Aboriginal Women in Sport and Recreation

by Victoria Paraschak

Dans cet article l'auteure nous fait part de l'approche unique des autochtones concernant les différences sexuelles et raciales.

The relationship between culture, race, and gender warrants examination.

Academics, along with the public in general, know very little about the experiences of Aboriginal girls and women in physical activity. Reviews on gender relations and sport (Birrell 1988) and race relations and sport (Birrell 1989) point to the dearth of information on women of colour. A recent comprehensive review on gender and sport, in sport history (Vertinsky), does not identify literature in this area. Books addressing Aboriginal sport in general (Oxendine; Churchill *et al.*; Zeman) provide few comments on female participants and organizers, leaving the impression that "male" Aboriginal sport is Aboriginal sport (Paraschak, in press).

The few articles which discuss Aboriginal women's involvement in sport suggest, however, that there is a rich history of involvement on the part of these women, in roles as disparate as athlete, coach, supporter, and organizer (Paraschak, in press). Aboriginal women had a history of involvement in some traditional games (Craig; Cheska), as well as in traditional games festivals, such as the Good Woman Contest in the Northern Games (Paraschak 1991). They have also been active in Eurocanadian sports such as basketball, softball, track and field, rodeo, cross-country skiing, badminton, baton twirling, billiards, bowling, broomball, figure skating, golf, hockey, speedskating, tennis, and volleyball (Cheska; Zeman; Paraschak

1990). These athletes have participated in mainstream sport, and in competitions organized by and for Native peoples themselves (Paraschak 1990). Some of these athletes have been highly successful at the international level, in sports as disparate as basketball, table tennis (Craig), cross-country skiing (Zeman), softball (Paraschak, in press), lacrosse, and track. For example, in 1995 Angela Chalmers, an Aboriginal middle distance runner from Victoria, British Columbia, was awarded one of 16 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards—the only award given to a sportsperson (CBC). She had won several medals in international competitions, and most recently had been the flag-bearer leading in the Canadian contingent at the opening ceremonies of the 1994 Commonwealth Games—the Games where she won a gold medal in her event.

Some of the literature addressing Aboriginal women's sporting participation conflicts with what we know about women in sport generally. Craig suggests that sports involvement is not at odds with an Aboriginal girls' gender identity. She notes, for example, that family and friends were very supportive of and interested in female athletes, that female athletes at the Albuquerque Indian School were looked up to as leaders, and that "femininity" did not seem to be an issue for these female athletes. Paraschak (1990) identifies wide-ranging involvement in sport by girls and women on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, challenging the notion that women athletes limit themselves to stereotypically "feminine" activities. As well, Northern Games organizers in the Northwest Territories have demonstrated an interesting approach towards gender equity. Not only have they opened up traditionally "male" activities to female participants, but they have also facilitated men's par-

ticipation in the Good Woman Contest (Paraschak 1991)—a welcome change from our usual uni-directional pattern of women having to fit into men's sporting contexts!

Other aspects of Aboriginal women's involvement in sport mesh more consistently with mainstream practices in women's sports. For example, while Angela Chalmers was appropriately acknowledged this year for her numerous accomplishments in track, recognition historically for outstanding female athletes in both Canada (through the Tom Longboat Award) and the United States (through the American Indian Hall of Fame) has been predictably poor (Paraschak 1990). As well, the All-Indian Sport System, while including both male and female activities, does favour male sports more so than female sports (Paraschak 1990). These trends suggest that aspects of Aboriginal women's involvement in sport are shaped by the same patriarchal relations which underlie mainstream sport.

The relationship between culture, race, and gender also warrants examination. For example, we know that some Aboriginal groups were matriarchal in nature. Might this help explain the extensive involvement of Six Nations women in sport? We also know that Aboriginal women in Canada were discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, and marital status until 1985, in that they lost their Indian status if they married a non-Indian (Jamieson). This discrimination impacted on subsequent sporting opportunities in some cases. One Aboriginal woman, whose Indian status was revoked, noted her anger when her daughter was denied entry into the Indian Summer Games because she was "non-status."

When it came to Indian Summer Games, they said "You can't play because you're non-status."

You're not an Indian." I said, "My God, she's got as much Indian in her as a lot of them here." That's when I really got mad. (Silma, 219).

What happened to these women and their children in terms of sport before 1985, and how have these individuals been dealt with subsequent to 1985? And what about the "natural athlete" stereotype attributed to Aboriginal men, as well as male and female African Americans—has this shaped the way that Aboriginal sportswomen view themselves? The answer to these and other questions will greatly enrich current knowledge about women's involvement in sport and recreation.

My involvement while participating in, watching, and studying Aboriginal sport has convinced me that these girls and women are enthusiastic, active members of a sporting world which only partially resembles mainstream sport practices. Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport system (Paraschak 1983). Despite those problems, they have been active participants in their own right, generating unique approaches for addressing the dynamic issues of race and gender. They remain, however, largely invisible in the current record on women's sport. Hopefully Aboriginal sportswomen will, in the future, write and talk more extensively about their experiences—experiences which may help us think about sport, and gender relations, in new and creative ways.

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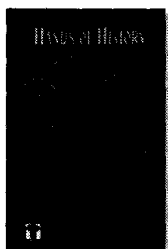
MARIE-CLAUDE JULIEN

Dernière minute

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La dernière
S'écoule
Irrévérencieuse innocente
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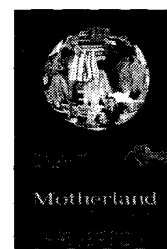
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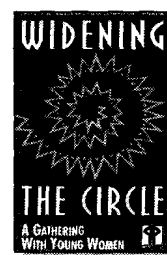
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