European Influence on Indigenous Sport

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November 28, 2018

HIST 1120-01

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In the study of early Canadian history, a common topic of discussion is the impact colonization had on the Indigenous communities inhabiting the country. However, a less addressed topic is how colonizers affected the smaller aspects of Indigenous life – in particular, sports. Lacrosse, being the main sport played by Indigenous peoples during the early nineteenth century, was undoubtably affected by the arrival of European settlers. Michael Payne sees the influence of Europeans on Indigenous sports as not appearing until “well into the nineteenth century. Nor did they borrow much from the Europeans”[[1]](#footnote-1) at this time. As contact between these two groups increased, so did the changes that occurred in both the play and who could participate in the game of lacrosse. The implications of the changes to lacrosse are still felt by Indigenous peoples to this day. As Confederation approached, lacrosse shifted from being played openly and freely by Indigenous groups like the Ojibway to be a tightly controlled European game played by the sports clubs of Montreal and other surrounding areas.

One such European was Peter Grant, who recorded his view of Indigenous lacrosse games in what would later become Manitoba. Although this account was written by a European fur trader, there is little evidence in the document of European influence over the game at this point of contact. Lacrosse was “not played in all regions of Canada in the early days”[[2]](#footnote-2), but to the Ojibway people “’hurdle’ [was] their favourite game”, something that was clear even to an outsider like Grant. At the time called “hurdle”, lacrosse was played “naked, save their breech clouts” and the game was well planned out, having been played “among Native groups” for “social and symbolic” purposes. Even though ‘hurdle’ was viewed merely as a game by third party observers, but to the many Indigenous groups that participated in the practice, lacrosse held a largely symbolic importance and lead to trades and a sense of community that lends itself to the explanation of why lacrosse was so thoroughly planned out in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. “Everything being prepared” from the “proper barriers” to the tools used to throw the ball, show just how important lacrosse was to the “parties” that participated. From what we know of the time this was taking place, the energies of men and women alike was dedicated solely to those which were deemed important, and if so much time was dedicated to this form of “warfare”, then we can deduce that lacrosse was not an activity taken lightly.

One group that placed high importance on the sport of lacrosse was the Ojibway, the group credited with originating the game[[3]](#footnote-3). However, as contact between fur traders and Indigenous groups like the Ojibway increased, so did the changes that took place within the rules and play of lacrosse. Both “oral traditions” of “Indians” and “written references”[[4]](#footnote-4) begin to reference changes in the way lacrosse was played and subsequently passed on to younger generations. When lacrosse moved into Montreal, the design of the sticks used to play changed to better suit the way Europeans wanted to play. “The expanse of string increased dramatically”[[5]](#footnote-5) to create a more teamwork styled game with passing as the emphasis[[6]](#footnote-6), as opposed to the more individual game that had long been the Indigenous style of play. As European colonizers became more involved in the lives of Indigenous peoples, they began to regulate the sport to suit European ways and ignore the previous rules that governed Indigenous play. The mid-1860s marked the beginning of a concentrated effort to expand the play of lacrosse into more settler communities with “George Beers’s propagandizing”[[7]](#footnote-7) the sport with articles on rules and play-by-plays.

*A Concise History of Sport in Canada* cites the first appearance of rules for lacrosse as appearing in a newspaper in 1860[[8]](#footnote-8). This appearance marks the beginning of lacrosse being played by non-Indigenous people, as well as an attempt to “formalize the sport”[[9]](#footnote-9). Although not many Europeans played lacrosse in mid-nineteenth century Canada, its appearance in a newspaper points to a growing interest and popularization of the sport. The initial reaction to lacrosse from Europeans settling in what would become Manitoba and surrounding areas was a resistance to what was viewed as a lesser version of “the revered sport of cricket”[[10]](#footnote-10). Holding desperately onto traditions brought from Britain, European fur traders and settlers alike preferred a game that reminded them of where they came from as opposed to lacrosse, which was entirely new. With the introduction of rules and European players, lacrosse began to change dramatically. Prior to the implementation of set rules came changes to game play itself.

By the 1850s the basis of the game had changed from being focused on “mass attacks of the [Indians] running”[[11]](#footnote-11) to being about “team-work and positional play”[[12]](#footnote-12). Part of the reason for this transition was the influence of “the Church” as “the traditional ascetic attitude … [transforming] into a largely athletic one”[[13]](#footnote-13). As a result of its ties to the Old Country, religion was extremely important to European settlers. This means that whatever the Church deemed important was often considered important to settlers. Even the English name for the sport is attributed to Jesuit missionaries interested in participating in the sport for the spread of the gospel[[14]](#footnote-14), so the influence of religion on the shift of lacrosse to settler communities is apparent in many aspects of the game.

The latter half of the 1850s and the early years of the 1860s is marked by a concentrated effort to regulate and incorporate lacrosse into the sports clubs already established in Montreal. Lacrosse was one of four sports that made up “twenty-four clubs”[[15]](#footnote-15) in the city by 1860. With the creation of these clubs came regulations not just on the way the game was played, but also on who was allowed to play it. Common requirements to join a sports club were being “gentlemen, white, relatively wealthy, probably Tory in political affiliation, and associated the ruling Family Compact[[16]](#footnote-16)”, all of which exclude First Nations men in every aspect.

Each of these changes to the sport originally called baggataway, played differently in different tribes[[17]](#footnote-17), represent the oppression of Indigenous peoples that played a major role in Indigenous lives in the nineteenth century. Sport played an important social role in 1830s Canada[[18]](#footnote-18), once cities became more populous and settlers had time for activities beyond survival. Sport began to play a social role the began in the taverns[[19]](#footnote-19) and created a space for (white) men to be “publicly [amused]”[[20]](#footnote-20) and within the tavern a “general meeting [place]”[[21]](#footnote-21). The “British influence”[[22]](#footnote-22) that Redmond highlights showcases not just influences over sport, but also the idealized society that British colonists wanted to create, although not “always in beneficial, superior or welcome”[[23]](#footnote-23) ways. By assessing the ways that lacrosse changed in the 1800s we can view tangible evidence of British influence over every aspect of Indigenous life. Lacrosse was an almost religious experience for the Ojibway people and numerous other Indigenous tribes[[24]](#footnote-24), and the colonization of Canada stole Indigenous ownership over the sport for decades. Despite Beers’ proposing “lacrosse as the national game of Canada in 1859”[[25]](#footnote-25), still to this day many Canadians struggle to accept the traditional sport of lacrosse as a national sport, with lacrosse being “confined to pockets of southern Ontario”[[26]](#footnote-26) which is a further expression of the erasure of Indigenous culture in the world of Canadian sport.

From first contact to Canadian society today, lacrosse’s impact on our culture has been substantial. If Canada is to truly reconcile with the Indigenous peoples that originated this land, we must begin by recognizing that European arrival affected every aspect of Indigenous culture. Lacrosse was traditionally a cultural and religious experience; respect towards the tradition of baggataway cannot be overstated.

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1. Michael Payne, “The Sports, Games, Recreations, and Pastimes of the Fur Traders at York Factory” in *Sports in Canada: Historical Readings,* ed. Morris Mott (Mississauga, Ontario: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1989), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Don Morrow et. al, *A Concise History of Sport in Canada* (Toronto, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Morris Kenneth Mott, “Games and Contests of the Early ‘Manitobans’” in *Sports in Canada: Historical Readings,* ed. Morris Mott (Mississauga, Ontario: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1989), 18-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Don Morrow and Kevin B. Walmsley, *Sport in Canada: A History* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid,* 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid,* 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Don Morrow et. al, *A Concise History of Sport in Canada* (Toronto, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1989), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid,* 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid,* 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gerald Redmond, “Some Aspects of Organized Sport and Leisure in Nineteenth Century Canada” in *Sports in Canada: Historical Readings,* ed. Morris Mott (Mississauga, Ontario: Copp Clark Pittman Ltd., 1989), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Maxwell L. Howell and Reet A. Howell, *History of Sport in Canada* (Champaign, Illinois: Stipes Publishing Company, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Anne Hall et. al, *Sport in Canadian Society* (Toronto, Ontario: Mcclelland & Stewart Inc, 1991), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid,* 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Howell and Howell, *History of Sport,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hall et.al, *Sport in Canadian Society,* 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Redmond, “Some Aspects of Sport”, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Howell and Howell, *History of Sport,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Morrow et.al, *Concise History of Sport,* 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)