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

Aboriginal women had a history of involvement in sport, and in some cases, this involved sport as a dominant social activity. 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 participation 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 women’s sport. Hopefully Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport practices. Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport practices. Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport practices. Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport practices. Aboriginal peoples as a whole have difficulty accessing the mainstream sport practices.

Victoria Paraschak is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Windsor. She spent five years in the Northwest Territories as a participant observer in community and territorial sport, which included working as a policy officer for the GNWT’s Sport and Recreation Division.

References


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9194 112 25 minutes $26.95
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Produced by Studio D of the NFB with the participation of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women and with financial assistance from the Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat.

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