



Are there Unique Aspects to Indigenous Sports that Go beyond Competition?



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Perspective

As a former gym teacher and Indigenous person who began his teaching career in a mid-northern Anishnabé school in the 1980's, I noticed certain peculiarities about my students when playing sports that weren't noticeable in the south. Even though I was from an Indigenous background, the fact that I was from a more urbanized area meant in order to play organized team sports I had to comply with the values of the majority culture, a win at all cost attitude that had sometimes prevented me from participating in team sports. Teams were chosen not based on ones potential to learn a sport, but rather on what was sometimes referred to as natural ability. This meant teams in the majority non-Indigenous culture were built on whether one could contribute to a team's performance and if you were perceived as not been adequate to a teams needs because of lack of ability, then you were discarded from the team. Your only chance was to hope there was a lower league to play in that would take you. In the end I stayed closer to individual sports than team sports because I knew I was going to be disappointed if I tried out for a team in the city.

The most important thing I learned from my northern Anishnabé students happened when my students competed among themselves. I noticed after about 10 minutes of playing they would quit counting score. The end result never seemed to be that important unless they were playing a team from the outside. Therefore competition was important, but wasn't the sole objective when participating on a team. Everyone was important on the team even if it meant it might have consequences for the team's victory. If I was to put it into a cultural context, it would be considered part of the Anishnabé wolf teaching of being humble. This meant that individuals would play hard but never put themselves above someone else on the team who wasn't as proficient in the game. This didn't mean that a team didn't know who the best player was or the best player didn't try their hardest, only that it was up to others on the team to decide that and not the individual who was the best player. The objective of a really good player was to lift up a player with the lesser ability and not themselves. It meant taking

that player and allowing them to play even if it meant a detriment to the final result.

My own people which are Mohawk, although our real name is Kenienké:haka "Flint People" were sometimes considered the inventors of the game of Lacrosse. In my language the game is called Tewarathon 'Little Brother of War' and sometimes 'the Creator's' game. There seemed to be a contradiction in these two names, but upon looking at the traditions, there really isn't. In fact there are life lessons to be learned in how to conduct oneself in sport or otherwise even in life. The first story told about Tewarathon, began in what we refer to as the sky world, a place above in the firmament of the sky that existed before the earth world below was created. In the story a young woman was given the task of bringing certain items to a male who was the Keeper of the Tree at the centre of the sky world that brought light to it. She was told by the Keeper through an emissary not to be distracted by anyone along the way. As she began her journey, she noticed many of the other beings in the sky world playing Tewarathon: the bear, the turtle, the beaver; the fox and others. She was carrying with her a vessel of water. The players being tired, saw her and one by one asked her for a drink? She knew she couldn't stop; however, compassion won her over and she gave one of the players a drink. Upon arriving at the keeper of the Tree of Lights place, she was berated by him for stopping. Eventually, she was forgiven and ended up as his consort.

Meanwhile, a problem had been occurring to the tree of light and that was that the buds on the tree that gave light to the sky world had been going dim. Eventually, in a jealous rage, he threw his consort through a hole in the sky, and the lights on the tree went out, while the world below, was given life through the waters that burst from her body as she fell below. The life giving properties of the woman had shown the importance of compassion and that jealousy could destroy not only people but even worlds. It is from this story that Kenienké:haka give the name of Lacrosse it's real moniker, Creator's game as it was said the game was played for the Creator's own amusement in the Sky World.

What we learn from the story is that all of the characters in it have an influence on the world that we now live in, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. As the rest of the sky beings fell below, they began to provide all of the important necessities that make up the earth world. The loon and crane offered themselves as a cushion for the woman who fell from the sky to rest on. The turtle provided his back so that the woman could begin the process of life. The beaver, otter and finally the muskrat attempt in bringing earth from under the water. Muskrat being the weakest and the only one who actually achieves in bringing earth from below the waters to be placed on turtles back, allows us to understand that even the weakest among us may be the one who achieves the greatest thing in the end and we should never discount anyone. This is exemplified not only life but sport as well. Everyone can contribute in some way. After the earth was placed on the turtles back by muskrat, the woman who fell from the sky became known as Otsista 'Mature Flowers' and her daughter who was later born on the earth 'Owashera' Blooming Flowers are representing first life, the plant world. Owashera had two sons Teharonhia:wako ' Holder of the Heavens' and Sawiskera ' He Brings the Ice or winter' Born as twins they had put everything into form in the world even though they were opposites including human beings who were among the last to be created. Although Sawiskera is a disruptive entity, even he has a place in the creation.

Pretty much all of Tewarathon players that participated in the game that Sky Woman had first stopped and gave water became participants in the formation of the earth world and so we find out why it was called the Creator's game. Each would become participants in the earth world's creation. As human beings entered the story we learned that they all had been become participants in creation of world and in some way sacrificed themselves so that human beings could exist. Humans in turn must reciprocate and one of the things they did was become participants in Tewarathon in remembrance of the players and their sacrifice they made by leaving the game in the sky world and providing for us on the earth

world. Eventually the sky world would be lighted once again by the spirits of those same forms on earth and the game would continue both above and below. The game of life is one of participation, sacrifice and renewal as is Tewarathon.

The second story about Tewarathon has to do with when the human beings finally settled and inhabited the earth. As the game continued warriors utilized it for practice and conditioning for warfare. It became known as the Little Brother of War. The game was played over large fields and warriors learned how to utilize the implements of the game such as the stick much like a war club. Many of the nations including the Kenienké:haka begin fighting one another and war chiefs began to take over the functions of leadership. Boys began playing Tewarathon at a young age where they learned how to destroy the enemy. Tewarathon became a game explicitly for training warriors for conflict.

One day, a member of the Wendat nation was born to a woman who had left with her grandmother to escape the violence that had everyone immersed in. At around the age of twelve the boy and his grandmother and mother decided that they would return to their village. By this time all of the chiefs had become war chiefs. One morning as the boy was walking around the village he noticed all of the other boys in the field playing Tewarathon. They were playing hard and some of them were getting hurt. He called all the boys over and began to speak to them about the benefits of peace. He said if all the weapons were put away they would be happier and a lot of the grief would be over. His message was a combination of peace, power and righteousness through having a good mind. He told the boys. Imagine if you played the game as a means to resolve conflict rather than train for conflict. He explained that Tewarathon can be played as a form of reconciliation. Instead of going to battle it could be used to bring differing parties together. The joy from the game would help us resolve our differences. Eventually all of the warring nations put down their weapons and when they got together to either resolve a problem or simply to play for their own or the Creator's enjoyment, they played the game of Tewarathon.



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