

Child's Play: In the Best Interests of the Child

Patricia Stirbys

Introduction

Whether from the inner city or from a reserve, Aboriginal¹ children need greater opportunities to participate freely and without limitation in sport. It is recognized through international declarations and conventions that a child shall have the full opportunity for play and recreation which promotes their general culture, and that equal opportunities be provided for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. Participation in sport increases the possibilities for the child to develop skills and abilities, not only in sport, but also in such areas as teamwork, cooperation and strategy building which will assist them in the greater society.

After realizing that few opportunities existed for First Nation children to participate in mainstream sports, the Saskatchewan First Nation² community in 1974 created the Saskatchewan Indian Games. Two hundred children participated in its first year. However, twenty-five years later, despite the continuous growth of the Saskatchewan Indian Games from its small beginnings to the participation of over 2600 participants today, the barriers for Aboriginal participation in sport still remain.

The following paper is a brief overview about the Saskatchewan experience from one perspective. It includes the provisions of the *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as the framework for the discussion on the importance of participation in recreation and leisure as opposed to competition. The paper will outline some of the barriers to Aboriginal participation in sport generally, and to participation in the broader sporting community. Through two Saskatchewan

(Canada) examples, the paper will illustrate solutions to overcoming these barriers.

International Declarations and Conventions: Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The following provisions of the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* are the frameworks for discussion. Neither the Declaration nor the Convention mentions competition, but rather raises the importance of play, recreation and leisure activities.

According to Principle 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child: *The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which promotes his or her general culture and enables the child on a basis of equal opportunity to develop his or her abilities, individual judgment, sense of moral and social responsibility and to become a useful member of society.*

Many First Nation communities, mostly rural, do not have regular sport and recreation activities for children and youth; thereby the 'full opportunity for play and recreation' is lacking. In the urban centers, as well, barriers exist which hinder Aboriginal participation in sport. Without such ongoing physical activities, young people can potentially miss out on the teamwork and learning that sports activities could provide. Involvement in sport can benefit in many ways.

Studies have shown that regular involvement in sport can reduce stress in children, help them to perform as well or better academically³ and even reduce crime. In Northern Manitoba (Canada), those communities with a sport

¹ The term Aboriginal includes Indian (status and non-status), Metis and Inuit.

² The terms First Nation and Indian are used interchangeably.

³ Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 1982.

program showed a 17.3 percent reduction in crime, and on average, a 10.6 percent increase in crime in communities without a program.⁴

Rural and urban communities, therefore, have an incentive to create accessible sport programs and to overcome barriers to participation in sport. As has been illustrated, positive outcomes can result both for the child and the community when sport and recreation programming is made available.

Also, Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Article 31 combines recreation and play with culture. An important step in ensuring a sense of belonging for Aboriginal children is attention to their culture. Perhaps the founders of the Saskatchewan Indian Games had this in mind when they created their Games. Prayer and spirituality play a large role in most local and major Aboriginal events such as the Games during which an elder gives a prayer and a blessing for the participants; Aboriginal coaches and role models provide training and encouragement to the children and; immediate and extended family members participate as volunteers. Attention to culture in its simplest form means building a relationship with the individual child by asking them about their goals and aspirations and meeting with their family. The building of relationships is as important as the game.

We all recognize that the global response to the Declaration and the Convention is slow and

sometimes limited. Governments need to incorporate the principles of the Declaration and the articles of the Convention into their own public policies. While the Declaration and the Convention apply more specifically to international labour codes, they are also broad enough to apply to sport to protect our young athletes from exploitation in the quest to win. When applying such Declarations and Conventions to sport, we must focus on the development of the child and away from winning as the main goal.

When coaches, parents and communities begin to understand the true value of sport and its potential impact on the development of children in all cultures, races and across genders, then they will endeavour to promote the rights of the child within the context of sport.

Overview of the Saskatchewan Indian Games

The Saskatchewan Indian Games were created in 1974 to address the exclusion of First Nation children and youth from mainstream sports activities. When the First Nation community decided to create a separate Indian Games, it had two main objectives. The first objective was to help develop the infrastructure on each reserve that hosted the Games, and the second objective was to develop coaches and athletes. Through fundraising and corporate support, host reserves have new arenas, ball diamonds and soccer pitches. In addition, the Games have helped to build a community through volunteerism, leadership and large-event skill development. The young athletes have benefited from their involvement in healthy competition, if only during these Games. However, the second objective to develop coaches and athletes is evolving much slower.

While many volunteers have taken introductory coach training, few have hands-on experience to train young athletes effectively. Understandably, it will take some time to gain experience and be comfortable with one's training technique. However, experienced coaching is essential to developing the child's most basic skills and to encouraging their continued participation in sport.

⁴ Synthesis of the Research on the Benefits of Recreation, University of Manitoba, 1989.

The Saskatchewan Indian Games provide First Nation children, usually only those living on reserves, with an opportunity to participate in a variety of sports. This practise leaves out a large number of children in urban centres who may be status or non-status Indian, or Metis. Despite these exclusions, the Games are successful in terms of participation. However, too much time and money is spent exclusively on the Indian Games and not enough effort is directed to other opportunities for the rest of the year. Because of the lack of a development program for young athletes, many of the participants in the Indian Games are still at an introductory level of skill development. A broad base of training needs to be developed for every level of ability, while at the same time providing further training for those individuals showing promise for more elite sport.

Despite the marked increase in participation in the Indian Games from 200 participants in its first year to 2,600 participants today, the last twenty-five years have seen a limited increase in the participation of Aboriginal children in events outside of the Indian Games. The minimal increase may show that greater partnerships need to be created between the Aboriginal communities and provincial and national sports bodies to encourage Aboriginal participation. As will be discussed later in this paper, SaskSport, a federation of provincial sport organizations in Saskatchewan (Canada), along with sport stakeholders, have identified the need for Aboriginal Sport Development and for overcoming a number of barriers.

If we believe in the statements provided in the Declaration and the Convention that sport can create a solid foundation for personal development for a child, then long term strategies need to be implemented and supported.

Barriers to Participation

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sport organizations are slow to respond to the growing Aboriginal population. Demographic statistics for Saskatchewan show that one-quarter of all births are Aboriginal. By the year 2011, about 40 percent of the province's population under the age of 24 will be

Aboriginal. Now is the time to address many of the barriers that prevent or limit the participation of Aboriginal children in sport. The following paragraphs will provide some of the existing barriers.

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers is the financial limitations of Aboriginal families to enrol the child in an activity requiring a fee. A large percentage of Aboriginal families are in poverty due to an inability to find employment or to find work that provides them with a salary much above minimum wage. These financial limitations also make it difficult to pay for transportation. In addition, the urban centres now contain over half of many of the Aboriginal communities, but only about 20 percent of Aboriginal families are involved in urban sport activities. Many Aboriginal families are not aware of the activities available to them, and that lack of awareness restricts their ability to participate.

The lack of parental involvement or Aboriginal role models also poses a barrier. Without parental encouragement, the child could potentially seek other activities which put them into trouble with the law. More Aboriginal role models, coaches and volunteers are required to develop a healthy view of sport in a child and to show both Aboriginal children and their parents that they are welcome and included in all activities.

Finally, existing sport programs show a lack of cultural support or little attention to cultural issues affecting young athletes within the urban centers. Greater linkages and integration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sport organizations may increase understanding of cultural issues.

Generally, Aboriginal children have little opportunity to develop their abilities, individual judgment and sense of moral and social responsibility through sport either on reserve or within the urban centers. Yet, sport has the potential to be the venue through which these aspects of the child can be developed.

Elimination of Barriers and Relationship Building

What can communities and organizations do to overcome barriers to ensure the development

of the rights of the child in sport, culture, recreation and leisure and ensure that the best interests of the child are met? Two organizations in Saskatchewan (Canada) have demonstrated that cross-cultural partnerships can help to create solutions to overcome barriers.

Wascana Racing Canoe Club

In 1993, in the city of Regina, the Wascana Racing Canoe Club placed a special emphasis on exposing inner city Aboriginal children to the sports of kayaking and canoeing. The Canoe Club first had to overcome three main barriers: transportation, financial, and attitudinal.

To address the first barrier of transportation, organizers provided a bus to transport the children to the pool at the University and back home. Secondly, to resolve a financial issue that the children generally came from low-income homes, sponsorships were found to cover the cost of providing the program and the children participated free of charge. Thirdly, to ensure a positive attitude and full benefit for each child, the children developed their skills together as a group, yet at their own pace, gained confidence and then were integrated into the club as a whole. As well, to encourage their participation, the Canoe Club liaised with Aboriginal role models to speak to the youth in the core-area schools about the benefits of participating in sport. The Canoe Club also worked closely with community resources like Youth Unlimited that had expertise in working with low-income and core area Aboriginal youth.

The success of the kayak and canoe project was indicated through the positive reactions of the twenty-five children who participated in the program, the positive relationships that were built and the commitment of the coach who took diversity training to be more sensitive to the participants' culture.

SaskSport and Aboriginal Sport Development

SaskSport, a federation of provincial sport organizations in Saskatchewan, participated in a series of consultations with sport stakeholders in 1993 and identified the need for Aboriginal Sport Development. The

objective of Aboriginal Sport Development is to broaden the participation base and increase the quality and diversity of sport opportunities for Aboriginal people by involving the Aboriginal community.

The program has three goals:

1. To facilitate the development of effective relationships, alliances and linkages between Aboriginal agencies and communities within the sport system;
2. To develop an Aboriginal coaching strategy that significantly increases the number of qualified coaches to provide leadership within Aboriginal communities; and
3. To increase the number of Aboriginals participating in sport.

SaskSport has partnered with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and the Metis Nation to initiate training and educational opportunities that enhance community planning, management and coordination of programs and services. Sharing knowledge assists in increasing understanding within the sport community of the cultural basis of Aboriginal sport. However, much of the resulting information from the partnering organizations does not always get transferred to the local communities. Therefore, a communication and training strategy is recommended that involves the grassroots communities. Such a strategy needs to be implemented on the reserves and widely marketed in the urban centers where more ideas for programming and training are needed most.

In addition, the lack of coaching experience limits the quality of skills that can be taught to the young athletes. A coaching strategy requires joint motivation in long-term, ongoing planning, promotion and implementation of coaching initiatives between the various levels of the Indian and Metis governments, the coaching associations, provincial sport governing bodies and universities. By working together, the broader partnership can train potential Aboriginal recruits as course conductors for the delivery of National Coaching Certification Programs.

To assist in expanding Aboriginal participation, it is recommended to increase the awareness, education and strategies that address gender balance within Aboriginal sport and recreation programming. Few participants tend to be young Aboriginal girls.

The Aboriginal Sport Development program has made some headway in terms of forming alliances between SaskSport and Aboriginal organizations, and developing coaches. However, as has been discussed, there must be a greater sharing of training and educational opportunities with grassroots communities, an increase in the quality of coaching and an increase in Aboriginal participation, in part, by addressing gender balance in programming.

Overall, the urban program developed by the Wascana Canoe Club was a success. As well, the Aboriginal Sport Development program has made some progress toward reaching its goals and objective, but more implementation of ideas needs to be made. Unfortunately, few sport programs exist on rural reserves because limited budgets do not allow for ongoing programming in sport, culture and recreation. With the expected demographic increase in Aboriginal children and youth, it is important to continue to build bridges between the Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal sport sector to improve participation in sport, and to enhance understanding between cultures.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that an opportunity exists in both recreational and competitive sport, to eliminate barriers and to build relationships between cultures, genders and among races. Some steps have been taken to achieve this ideal.

Without a doubt, successes have been achieved when Aboriginal youth participate in mainstream competitive sporting events. However, many others need to first learn the joys of sport through participation in activities at their community level from a young age. They should be encouraged to stay involved in sport and be shown the opportunities and potential for more elite sport should they choose. The development of ongoing recreational programs for young people

through the cooperation of grassroots communities, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sports organizations is essential.

Sport is more than a game, and sport is more than just winning. It includes the right, the respect and the full opportunity for play and recreation, the promotion of the individual's general culture, and equal opportunity to develop abilities and recreational and leisure activity.

We have a responsibility and an obligation to ensure that all children from all economic and cultural walks of life are provided with the appropriate and equal opportunities to reach their full potential. Sport can help them reach that potential.

Biography

Patricia Stirbys is a Cree member of the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan, Canada. She has graduated from Broadcasting, English and Law. She is currently a practising lawyer.

Patricia was actively involved with the development and care of children through her position as Director of Human Resources and Programs for Cowessess First Nation overseeing the Sport, Recreation and Culture program, and as a member of the Board of Directors for the Yorkton Tribal Council Indian Child and Family Services Inc.

Prior to joining the Cowessess Band Office, Patricia had the opportunity to work in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal government organizations providing contract services and launching the Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Program. Patricia has been actively involved in sports since childhood and recognizes the positive impact it has on the full development of people. She has had the opportunity to be involved in children's sport at a coaching level and continues to remain active in sport herself.