Indigenizing Sport Research: Analyzing Protective Factors of Exercising Sovereignty in North America

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Indigenous Peoples have an inherent responsibility and right to “exercising” sovereignty—the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of our cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship. By exercising this inherent right and responsibility, sport has the power for communities to reenvision their futures. Sport and physical activity are highly regarded and practiced in multiple contexts within Indigenous communities. Utilizing Indigenous ways of knowing, practices of resurgence, Indigenous activism, and Indigenous responses to political and cultural injustices, we apply the five protective factors of “exercising” sovereignty, including community, relationality, strength, abundance, and resilience to analyze Indigenous sport research in North America.

Sport and physical activity have always been integral and interrelated aspects of Indigenous lifeways (Best, 1976; Forsyth & Giles, 2012; Hallinan, 2015; Robinson, 2005). Physical activities such as running, stickball, and lacrosse are present in Indigenous creation stories, sustenance, and ceremonial activities. While physical movement has undoubtedly aided in the sustainability of Indigenous Nations and communities, sport also continues to empower Indigenous Peoples. There is currently an Indigenous resurgence through sport, where Indigenous Peoples and communities are creating spaces of athletic activism to “exercising” sovereignty—the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of our cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship (Ali-Joseph, 2018; Leonard et al., 2020). Athletic activism within Indigenous communities can be defined as using sport, or one’s role in sport, to promote social and political change (Kauffman, 2008). By exercising this inherent right and responsibility, sport empowers Indigenous communities to reenvision our futures. We apply the protective factors of the exercising sovereignty framework (Leonard et al., 2020), including, community, relationality, abundance, strength, and resilience, to research on Indigenous resurgence and athletic activism to assess opportunities and challenges for Indigenizing sport sociology research.

In this article, we contend that the extension of the concept of exercising sovereignty through athletic activism holds the potential to transcend sport experiences and encompass a broader scope, specifically within the realm of sport sociology research. While athletic activism has traditionally centered on the pursuit of social change within sports, we propose that its application can be broadened to inform and shape sociological inquiries that delve into the intricate relationships between sports, culture, society, and identity (Calow, 2022). By integrating the framework of exercising sovereignty, initially developed to understand Indigenous athlete responses during the pandemic (Leonard et al., 2020), we advocate for its adaptation as an analytical tool within sport sociology. This extension enables us to explore not only the individual agency and collective action of athletes but also to examine the sociocultural impacts, power dynamics, and systemic structures that intersect with sport, thereby advancing a more holistic understanding of the intricate sociological dimensions of sports within Indigenous contexts.

Sovereignty and sport are integral components of Indigenous communities, as they both serve as mechanisms for resistance, resilience, and cultural expression. Sovereignty is the foundation of Indigenous nationhood, as it refers to the inherent right to self-governance as well as rights to self-determination over lands, waters, resources, citizenry, and territories (Biolsi, 2005). As three Indigenous women with experience in sport and academia, we have come together to discuss the application of these protective factors to the emerging area of Indigenous sport research in sport sociology. Sport is a powerful tool for Indigenous communities to assert and celebrate our sovereignty, as it allows for the expression of cultural values and traditions (Ali-Joseph & Welch, 2021). Through sport, Indigenous Nations affirm national identities, build social cohesion, promote physical and mental health, and combat the negative effects of colonialism, such as intergenerational trauma (Downey, 2012). Additionally, Indigenous athletes have used sport as a platform for advocacy and activism, drawing attention to social and political issues affecting their communities (Phillips et al., 2019). The significance of sovereignty and sport in Indigenous communities underscores the importance of supporting and amplifying Indigenous voices in the field of sport and beyond.

Today, Indigenous sport remains an important part of Indigenous cultures and identities, with Indigenous athletes and...
communities making significant contributions to national and international sport (Cahwee & Harjo, 2023). In recent years, decolonization has emerged as a prominent and timely topic in sport sociology and other academic fields (McGuire-Adams, 2020; Shahjahan et al., 2021; Young, 2013). However, the implementation of decolonizing strategies remains limited, as the discourse surrounding it is often steeped in inaccessible academic language, leading to a gap between theory and practice. The analysis offers practical examples of how to meaningfully connect Indigeneity with sport sociology. By highlighting authentic examples through an Indigenous framework, this work will inform future interventions in the field of sport sociology that centers Indigenous experiences and knowledge. This work moves beyond decolonization as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012) or a “verb” (Whitinui, 2021) to argue for the Indigenization of sport sociology. We argue that decolonization should not be limited to a metaphorical or rhetorical exercise, but rather should be seen as an ongoing process of Indigenization. This involves centering Indigenous ways of knowing, practices of resurgence, and Indigenous activism in the field of sport sociology. The five protective factors of “exercising” sovereignty introduced by Leonard et al. (2020) include community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength, providing a framework for analysis of the Indigenization of sport sociology (See Figure 1). Protective factors are generally defined as individual or community attributes that help to lessen the impact of some stressor that would cause harm to individual or community well-being (Henson et al., 2017; Tudor et al., 2019). Figure 1 contains an Indigenous athlete—a Native Hoop Dancer. Hoop dancing is an Indigenous sport that combines storytelling and dance and is representative of the intergenerational knowledge embedded within Indigenous sport. The interconnected hoops exemplify the linkages among the identified protective factors for the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of Indigenous cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship. The Hoop dancer represents intergenerational acts of healing, as contemporary physical expressions of sovereignty have been strengthened through the activism of our ancestors.

The agency of Indigenous athletes is central to this framework, as they are key actors in the reclamation and revitalization of Indigenous sport. The profound relevance of community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength in Indigenous cultures necessitates their integration into sport sociology research and practice. This not only respects Indigenous sovereignty but also enhances our understanding of Indigenous sporting experiences, offering a sovereignty-rooted perspective that shapes our insights into motivations, dynamics, and outcomes of Indigenous participation in sports. Ultimately, the Indigenization of sport sociology can serve as a catalyst for positive social change and the promotion of Indigenous “exercising” sovereignty. We believe this integration is necessary to ensure that sport sociology research and contributions accurately reflect Indigenous Knowledge Systems, empower Indigenous communities, challenge historical biases, and create

Figure 1 — Five protective factors of “exercising” sovereignty. The Five Protective Factors of “Exercising” Sovereignty include community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength. Author designed with artistic rendering by Courtney M. Leonard and Frank Buffalo Hyde.
space for authentic narratives, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable representation of Indigenous experiences within the broader field of sport sociology.

Our use of the protective factors as an analytical framework is rooted in Leonard et al.’s (2020) research, which initially employed these factors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool for identifying Indigenous resilience during severe health insecurity. This article seeks to extend their application to a wider context encompassing Indigenous sport research across North America. In alignment with our Indigenist research approach rooted in abundance perspectives, our attention was directed toward protective factors that have arisen as responses to colonization, assimilation, and other traumas experienced by Indigenous Peoples. This deliberate emphasis contrasts with the deficit-focused language often associated with stressors and harms stemming from these historical policies and traumas. Given our commitment to encompassing this comprehensive perspective, we intentionally selected the exercising sovereignty framework, previously formulated during the pandemic, as a lens for analyzing sport sociology research.

The Five Protective Factors for Exercising Sovereignty Framework’s relevance in the sociology of sport for Indigenous Peoples lies in its ability to offer a robust analytical tool to explore the dynamics of Indigenous sporting experiences. This framework underscores the interplay of community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength—fundamental aspects that shape the sociocultural landscape of Indigenous sport. By applying this framework, researchers in the sociology of sport can delve into the connections between sports, culture, identity, and societal influences. These protective factors are interconnected and are shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing, and being, and the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous Peoples. Acknowledging the historical context is pivotal for comprehending gaps in Indigenous sport sociology research, as it sheds light on the complex nuances that have often been overlooked when categorizing and analyzing the multifaceted nature of Indigenous sport practices.

### Brief History of Indigenous Sport

Sport and physical activity have long provided a means for “exercising” sovereignty, both individually and collectively (Leonard et al., 2020). At its core, sovereignty is a Nation’s power to self-govern, to determine its own way of life, and to live a life free from interference. Tribal sovereignty is no different and shares the attributes and characteristics listed above (Cobb, 2005). The concept of “sovereignty” is intrinsically linked to both the historical and contemporary political and cultural rights and movements of Indigenous/American Indian/Native American peoples. There are over 575 Federally Recognized Tribes and 634 First Nations in what is currently known as the United States and Canada. These Native Nations are all culturally distinct communities, speak their own languages, and govern themselves as distinct political autonomies, different from both state, provincial and federal governments (Cobb, 2005).

Although sovereignty is generally considered a political issue, it cannot be disconnected from the cultural values of Indigenous communities. The term “exercising sovereignty” has been used by First Nation/Tribal leaders and scholars to understand how Indigenous communities have had to negotiate and fight for political, land, spiritual, physical, and humanistic rights. For Indigenous Peoples, sport and physical activity are inherently tied to these histories, cultures, languages, and lands (Leonard et al., 2020). In order to understand Indigenous sport over time and appreciate the social and cultural roles of contemporary Indigenous athletes and sports, one must recognize the social foundations of a sport and place these activities in a historical perspective.

Sport among Indigenous communities has been shaped by the legacy of settler-colonial assimilation policies institutionalized through residential and boarding schools (Bloom, 2000). While these assimilative practices caused immeasurable trauma by ripping children from their families and homelands, the boarding school experiences also provided a defining moment for Indigenous sport. Athletic prowess became a source of strength and identity for American Indians during their boarding school experience. Jim Thorpe, Louis Leroy, Albert Exendine, “Chief” Bender, William “Lone Star” Dietz, and Louis Tewanima, all products of early 20th century boarding school athleticism, became popular names across American sports media. In Canada, Olympic long-distance runners Alex Decoteau, Joe Keeper, and Tom Longboat attended residential schools (Cameron, 2014; Forsyth, 2013, 2020; Ross, 2016). Additionally, many of the 20th century’s leading Indigenous hockey players, such as Fred Sasakamoose, were forced to attend residential schools at a young age (Arcand, 2019; Paraschak, 2013).

Indigenous females had a somewhat different experience in sport, due to the enculturation needs for their expected societal roles and government policies of proper education. Lomawaima claims that “In order to mold young people’s minds, 19th century educators bent first to mold their bodies according to gender- and race-specific notions of capacities and inclinations” (Lomawaima, 1993, p. 228). This racialized gender hierarchy directly affected not only Indigenous females’ opportunities to participate in sports during the boarding school era, but also the notoriety of Indigenous female athletes in the general society.

Although there is a vacuum in the sport literature with regard to Indigenous female athletes in the early 20th century, this does not mean that Indigenous female athletes and teams did not exist (Peavy & Smith, 2005). One example is the 1904 girls’ basketball team from the Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School in Montana. Since its organization in 1902, the team elicited great school and community pride as they beat most of the state’s college and high school teams, and a few boys’ teams as well. Their success became so well known that they were invited to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis as students of the “Model Indian School” (Peavy & Smith, 2005, p. 67). The young women from Fort Shaw defeated every team they played and returned home from St. Louis as world champions (Peavy & Smith, 2005; Parezo & Fowler, 2007).

Additionally, athletics have played a central role in shaping Indigenous education, informing interpretations of race and race relations, and contributing to the formulation of contemporary Indigenous identities. Although sports were introduced into boarding schools to civilize both Indigenous males and females (Delsahut & Terret, 2014), especially through the introduction of football and basketball, boarding school athletic programs created a context for the celebration of intertribal cooperation and identity, sometimes on a scale rarely ever seen before. Sports facilitated opportunities and cultural exchange for Indigenous students during a time that aimed to instill western education to accelerate Indigenous cultural extinction (Bloom, 2000; Child, 2000; Gems, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Oxendine, 1988).

In Canada, the residential school system was established as a means of assimilating Indigenous Peoples into Euro-Canadian society and, ultimately, terminating Indigenous cultures. As
Forsyth and Wamsley (2006) highlighted, the promotion of sports in residential schools was aimed at instilling Euro-Canadian values and practices in Indigenous youth, while simultaneously using physical activity as a tool for discipline and punishment. However, despite the oppressive violence rampant in the schools, Indigenous students were able to create their own subversive and resistant forms of sport, which allowed for the expression of cultural identity and solidarity among students. These examples highlight the complex and often contradictory ways in which sport has been used to perpetuate colonialism and resist it, emphasizing the need for a critical examination of sport in relation to Indigenous Peoples and our experiences. The use of sport as a tool for resistance has continued into contemporary times, with Indigenous athletes leading resistance movements and challenging dominant narratives through their athletic achievements.

### Indigenous Sport Sociology Research

Indigenous sport sociology research is transdisciplinary and examines the intersections of sport, culture, identity, and society within Indigenous communities. It encompasses the study of various aspects of Indigenous sporting experiences, including participation, representation, community dynamics, power structures, and the impacts of historical and contemporary factors on Indigenous sports. Indigenous sport sociology research aims to unpack the complexities and nuances of Indigenous sporting practices, while also addressing social, cultural, and systemic issues that affect Indigenous athletes, communities, and their interactions with mainstream sports institutions. Building on Indigenous critical theory, Indigenous sport sociology research seeks to amplify Indigenous voices, challenge inequalities, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between sport and Indigenous identity within broader sociocultural contexts.

The Five Protective Factors of Exercising Sovereignty Framework outlines how sport and movement were practices of survivance for Indigenous Peoples and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Leonard et al., 2020). Survivance, a concept coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, refers to the persistence of Indigenous Peoples and cultures despite the ongoing effects of colonialism and assimilation policies (Sabzalian, 2019; Vizenor, 2009). Sport has been an important tool for Indigenous survivance, as it allows for the reclamation and celebration of traditional practices and the creation of new ones that reflect contemporary Indigenous experiences. Through sport, Indigenous athletes assert their sovereignty, resilience, and agency, challenging the dominant narrative of Indigenous inferiority and erasure. By participating in and excelling in sports, Indigenous athletes demonstrate their ability to navigate and thrive within a settler colonial society while maintaining their cultural identity and connection to their communities. In this way, sport becomes a site of resistance and a tool for the ongoing project of Indigenous survivance.

Contemporary Indigenous sport movements have emerged in recent years, driven by the desire to reclaim, revitalize, and celebrate Indigenous sport practices. These movements draw on Indigenous ways of knowing, values, and traditions to create culturally relevant and empowering sport experiences. Examples of contemporary Indigenous sport movements include the North American Indigenous Games, which bring together Indigenous athletes from across North America to compete in traditional and modern sports (Forsyth & Wamsley, 2006). These movements serve as a powerful tool for Indigenous Peoples to assert our sovereignty, reclaim our culture and identity, and combat the negative effects of colonialism.

The blend of traditional and introduced sports within Indigenous Country has created a sporting community that is diverse and resilient despite a legacy of trauma premised on the assimilative goal of, “Kill the Indian to save the man.” Whether running as their ancestors did or playing basketball, hockey, volleyball, softball, football, tennis, or wrestling to show the youth back home that it is possible to play a sport in college and have aspirations, these athletes assert their athletic identity in conjunction with their communities, a quality that is unique to Indigenous athletes. The statement “sport transcends across generations” (Ali-Joseph, 2018) holds true for Indigenous communities. In the following sections, we use the protective factors of community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength to highlight examples of areas for future research in Indigenous sport sociology. These factors will help us explore key facets that shed light on the dynamics and significance of Indigenous sporting experiences.

### Examples of Exercising Sovereignty: Community

Expanding upon the concept of sport as a generational bridge within Indigenous communities, the examination of sport sociology research through the lens of the community protective factor reveals the profound significance of communal bonds and their impact on various facets of Indigenous sporting experiences. Indigenous sport is integrated within both the historical and contemporary lifeways of Indigenous communities. The protective factor Community is grounded within Indigenous movement and can be seen within local and national Indigenous community efforts. Since Indigenous sport is a sovereign act, many of these communal movements are grounded in political rights and recognition of tribal sovereignty.

For example, on October 3rd, 2022, the 20th Anniversary of the National Congress of American Indians Sovereignty Run began in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (National Congress of American Indians, 2022). This 2,000-mile relay from Oklahoma to California aims to unite Tribal Nations, partners, and allies to heighten awareness and support of tribal sovereignty on a national level (National Congress of American Indians, 2022). Inspired by the recent reinstatement of the great Jim Thorpe’s Olympic Gold Medals, and in recognition of recent Supreme Court decisions that heavily impact Tribal Sovereignty in the state, Oklahoma was a natural starting point for the awareness run. The premise of the run was to organize and bring awareness and opposition to the Supreme Court ruling, Castro-Huera v. Oklahoma, which held that “the Federal Government and the State have concurrent jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed by non-Indians against Indians in Indian Country” (National Congress of American Indians, 2022). This decision diminishes Tribal Sovereignty and jurisdiction and the inherent ability to protect tribal citizens. While the 2022 Sovereignty Run was in protest and response to this decision, it was also an act of Indigenous resurgence and commemoration of the 2002 Sovereignty Run, where Indigenous Nations leaders and advocates embarked on a cross-country run from Washington state to Washington, DC to fight for sovereignty rights (National Congress of American Indians, 2022).

These Supreme Court decisions are built upon hundreds of years of Federal Indian policy and religious social movements aimed to limit tribal sovereignty. Communal efforts to affirm sovereignty through movement are generational and asserted through political
organizations and social awareness. Situating sport within the communal efforts of Indigenous Peoples and communities expands on not only the cultural phenomena within sport sociology but, more importantly, draws upon the political connections to sport.

Examples of Exercising Sovereignty: Resilience

Indigenous Peoples and our cultures exemplify resilience, outlasting centuries of state-sponsored attempts at complete eradication. Despite historical oppression and ongoing erasure amidst rapid societal change, Indigenous Peoples’ promotion of our cultural continuity is crucial to our resilience (Allen et al., 2014). Resilience is generally known as adapting positively despite experiencing significant adversity, as well as recovering well after experiencing trauma (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Wexler (2014) states, “Culture is offered as an antidote to protect against poor health outcomes and to bolster Indigenous well-being, but the nuances of this process remain unexplored” (Wexler, 2014, p. 74). We argue that one of such nuances involved in utilizing culture to promote Indigenous well-being is Indigenous sport.

As previously mentioned, Indigenous sport can refer to activities that were developed explicitly for and by Indigenous Peoples. The traditional game of stickball is one of those activities. The game of stickball has been modified to what many know now as modern-day lacrosse, all the while maintaining its traditional forms in many Indigenous communities. Stickball is a literal example of “more than sport,” because the game is more than physical activity, for many Indigenous communities it is known as the “medicine game” and a gift from the Creator. There are important ceremonial, communal, and spiritual aspects that are crucial to the sporting experience. Many of these aspects happen before anyone steps foot on a field. The game is also connected to many Indigenous communities’ Creation story, as an important part of their origination and a symbol of survivance.

The game of stickball would eventually become commoditized by colonizers. For example, in 1860 White Canadian George Beers created formal rules for the game that would become known as lacrosse, and is known to many as the inventor of lacrosse (Conover, 1997). Indigenous players were prohibited from playing or forced to play for Indigenous only teams. The game became known as elitist and associated with rich, White fraternity brothers. Despite efforts by new leagues like the Premier Lacrosse League, the whitewashing of lacrosse leads the average fan to overlook any Indigenous roots of lacrosse.

Despite their exclusion, many Indigenous communities have embraced both the traditional medicine game and the modern form of lacrosse. These athletes, such as the notorious Thompson brothers, find balance between preserving the traditional aspects while educating the mainstream about the Indigenous origins of the game. In 1990, the Haudenosaunee Nationals, an all-Haudenosaunee lacrosse team, traveled to Australia for the world championship under their own flag and carrying Iroquois passports. That was their first international competition. Then in 2010, the Haudenosaunee Nationals had their nations’ passports denied by Great Britain, ultimately barring them from the World Lacrosse Championship (Kaplan, 2010). Despite the lack of recognition and respect they have faced, the Haudenosaunee Nationals continue to compete and aim to play in the Olympics in 2028 (Denetclaw, 2022). Many tribes across North America still play their own version of stickball, either in exhibition form or as a continued part of traditional preservation and demonstrating their resilience. Furthermore, the next protective factor, relationality, is also significant in Indigenous sport experiences as it emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships within and outside of the community.

Examples of Exercising Sovereignty: Relationality

Within the protective factor of Relationality, Indigenous sport teaches unconditional acceptance and provides experiences of belongingness. Indigenous athletes competing outside their home communities often face racism, prejudice, and discrimination in sport. Those who are able to find supportive pathways and tools to persevere learn quickly that despite what others may say about them, their families, or Indigenous Peoples, first and foremost they must learn to accept themselves and love themselves unconditionally.

Unfortunately, the legacy of racism and discrimination in sport often creates a hostile environment for Indigenous athletes, and many struggle to find acceptance for themselves. Recently, these harms have manifested in the violence toward Indigenous athletes’ hair practices. Although Indigenous hair practices are diverse, many communities and nations’ cultural teachings express notions of acceptance and belonging through nurturing one’s hair, growing it long, and caring for it with unique styles such as braids and buns. However, as Indigenous athletes aim to compete in sports with other societies who do not share their hair practices, or worse, seek to privilege western practices, they have been the targets of horrific taunts that in some instances have led to physical assault and young people’s hair being cut in schools. These contemporary forms of bigotry ripple from the legacy of past U.S. and Canadian assimilation policies carried out in residential/boarding schools where Indigenous children upon arrival were stripped of all of their belongings and had their hair cut (McKee & Forsyth, 2019; Tardif, 2021). Therefore, Indigenous athletes today who dare to wear their hair in a braid or bun are not only practicing cultural teachings but are active in processes of reclamation, revitalization, and reconciliation for harms done to their ancestors.

Despite the efforts of these athletes, Canadian and American sport fans have notoriously taunted Indigenous athletes for their hair practices. Indigenous youth athlete activism is a powerful example of the protective factor of relationality in Indigenous sport experiences. Through their activism, young Indigenous athletes create meaningful connections with others and work toward building a sense of acceptance and belongingness. The mostly Navajo women’s basketball team’s fight to wear their hair in tsiiyeel (Navajo buns) is a prime example of this activism. In 2016, a mostly Navajo women’s basketball team was barred from playing in their league because they wore their hair in “Navajo Buns” (Reuters Staff, 2016). Despite being barred from playing in their league, the athletes did not back down. Instead, they turned to their community for support, and together they appealed to Arizona athletic officials to allow them to wear their hair in tsiiyeel (Navajo buns). Through their activism, the Navajo athletes not only fought for their right to wear their hair in a culturally significant style, but also raised awareness about the importance of cultural identity and expression in sports. This example highlights the importance of community support and solidarity in Indigenous youth athlete activism.

Indigenous athletes who embrace their cultural practices and pursue athlete activism challenge the norms of western-centric sports and create opportunities for Indigenous futurity. By carving out a path for themselves and future generations, they embody the
Examples of Exercising Sovereignty: Abundance

In today’s society abundance is often thought of primarily in the context of resources, but it can be applied broadly to Indigenous lifeways. For example, Indigenous ways of sharing vast amounts of knowledge through stories, with a focus on empowerment (Bau, 2022). Abundance does not simply mean plenty; it is a philosophical perspective that can also be found in Indigenous approaches to sport. Abundance is a protective factor that reflects the Indigenous practice of giving back to one’s family, nation, and community. Indigenous athletes are often change agents, who use their platform to promote athletic activism through positive social change and advocacy for social justice issues.

An example of abundance in action took place in the fall of 2021. Jessie Stomski-Seim, a Native American woman and General Counsel for the Prairie Island Indian Community, was asked to join the Local Organizing Committee for the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Women’s Basketball Final Four being held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in April 2022. These committees ensure NCAA Championships are successfully executed due to their local connections and resources. Jessie would only join the committee on one condition, that the NCAA would make a commitment to include the local Indigenous community in their festivities. She received assurance that this would be possible and quickly coordinated a group of advocates for Native Americans in sport to put together programming for the NCAA Women’s Final Four. This committee worked quickly to develop extensive programming that engaged the Minneapolis community with the Indigenous community. Instead of a simple land acknowledgement before games, the group put together an introductory video, a basketball camp for Indigenous youth, a panel of Indigenous basketball coaches Association providing education around recruiting and retaining Indigenous athletes. The group brought together nearly a dozen “legends” of Indigenous women’s basketball to attend the Final Four and all of the events. During one of the NCAA’s auxiliary events, several of these women participated in an exhibition game. The integration of these legends throughout the events was undoubtedly impactful for these women but also all of the spectators and fans of women’s basketball.

The group Jessie formed decided to keep their work going, forming the Indigenous Athletics Advancement Council. While they see the importance of organizations serving Indigenous youth, their focus is more on power structures like the NCAA, National Basketball Association, and other professional and established sport organizations to ensure they are appropriately serving their respective Native communities. While pointing out the disparities in sport leadership, the Indigenous Athletics Advancement Council is focused on creating spaces of abundance for Indigenous peoples through sport and the disruption of sports hierarchies. Indigenous sport organizations are also forming to create and sustain spaces of abundance for Indigenous voice, representation, and presence. For example, “Native Women Running” was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota by Verna Volker, a Navajo woman who aimed to encourage and feature Native women runners in the running community on and off the reservation/reserve (Native Women Running, 2020). When Verna began her running journey in 2009, she quickly realized the lack of Indigenous presence, voice, and recognition within the global and international running community. The Mission of Native Women Running is to “build and nurture a community that features and encourages Native women runners on and off the reservation/reserve. We strive to increase visibility in the running world nationwide and worldwide for historically excluded runners” (Native Women Running, 2020).

Verna is a Hoka Global Ambassador, Ultra Runner, and connects Indigenous women not only through physical movement, but has also created a social media platform for Indigenous women runners. Native Women Running sponsors 10–20 Indigenous runners at several runs around the United States and Canada, including the Boston Marathon, and has also organized missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) Virtual Runs, stating, “our Mission is to be in solidarity with MMIW, Girls, Two-Spirits, Relatives, grieving families, and individuals working on the frontlines to end this epidemic of violence against our Indigenous relatives” (RunSignup, 2022). Proceeds from these events always go to organizations to provide support to the MMIW crisis, such as Native Women’s Association of Canada. Native Women Running and other Indigenous running groups, such as the Indigenous Running Club, based in London, Ontario are important spaces for Indigenous Peoples to feel safe, supported, and visible.

Indigenous sport is not only a way of life but also a symbol of Indigenous culture and resurgence. The protective factor of abundance is demonstrated in these sporting events, as Indigenous athletes serve as change agents and give back to their communities through their sport. For instance, running events not only promote health and wellness but also serve as a way to honor MMIW and to recognize Boarding and Residential School survivors. Movement and physical activity are key components of Indigenous Peoples’ connection to the land and ancestors, sustaining the inherent right to exercise sovereignty.

Examples of Exercising Sovereignty: Strength

Indigenous sport is not just about physical activity, but it is also a means of gaining generational strength. This strength is necessary to overcome the intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism and the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. The values of kinship and family connectedness that are inherent in Indigenous communities cultivate this strength. For Indigenous athletes, sport provides a space to embody these values and connect with their family and community. In this section, we explore the protective factor of strength and its significance in Indigenous sport experiences.

In some Indigenous communities kinship values are embedded throughout the sport. In a study of Indigenous youth across Canada, Mason et al. (2019) found that kinship values were at the core of participants’ motivations for playing sport. Often the individuals who first introduce Indigenous youth to sport are their Indigenous extended family whether that be parents, siblings, cousins, or community members (Mason et al., 2019). Mason et al. (2019) further underscore that the time Indigenous youth are able to spend with their extended families through sport is pivotal to relationship building and belonging. Settler-colonialism may limit Indigenous access to many different types of physical resources needed to excel at sport such as equipment, transportation, and recreational
facilities. However, where Indigenous communities may lack physical resources denied to them by systems of oppression, they can contribute strong Indigenous kinship networks. These networks provide unwavering expressions of love and time dedicated to cultivating the passions of youth through sport. For many Indigenous athletes, these expressions of love are more valuable than anything and, in some instances, they have made all the difference as to whether an athlete reaches their dreams.

In contemporary Indigenous sport, the emphasis on reclaiming and revitalizing family connectedness plays a foundational role in countering the intergenerational legacy of trauma experienced by Indigenous families due to residential/boarding schools. The presence of Indigenous family dynasties in sport not only promotes Indigenous athletes’ athletic success but also serves as an important way for Indigenous communities to exercise their sovereignty.

A sport that has been filled with Indigenous family dynasties for decades is hockey. The onset of Native hockey family dynasties should not be surprising given the origins of contemporary hockey evolving from the Mi’kmaw game Duwarken (Bennett, 2018). In fact, many Indigenous Nations have games played on ice that are reminiscent of contemporary hockey and Indigenous craftspeople have long been sought after for their skill in carving playing sticks. Therefore, the presence of Indigenous families in the sport should be a welcome expectation, but like many aspects of settler-colonialism, the presence of Indigenous families in sport should not be surprising given the origins of contemporary hockey evolving from the Mi’kmaw game Duwarken (Bennett, 2018).

One family’s story, in particular, shares this experience—the Nolan family. Ted Nolan and his sons Brandon and Jordan are all members of Garden River First Nation and all played professional hockey (CTV, 2021). However, Ted Nolan was also the first Indigenous National Hockey League coach and achieved many firsts for Indigenous Peoples in professional hockey. However, his journey was not without deep difficulties brought on by severe racism and discrimination in the sport. Ted Nolan describes the racial slurs he was berated with throughout his career and how he navigated the verbal violence by calling home and speaking with his relatives who helped to give him strength to persevere (CTV, 2021). In 2021, during an episode of The Unwanted Visitor, Nolan describes how after being blacklisted from coaching in the National Hockey League due to prejudice and discrimination against Indigenous Peoples, like himself, he returned home to create the Ted Nolan Foundation and a charity with his sons, Brandon and Jordan, known as 3NOLANS in 2013 (3Nolans, 2022; CTV, 2021). In discussing the founding of the organization, he says, “I started the Ted Nolan Foundation for the Rose Nolan Scholarship Fund because my mother was so inspirational in my life” (CTV, 2021, 17:45).

Indigenous sport families often give back today through the development of youth sport organizations that emphasize building individual strength through familial connections. As Brandon Nolan highlights, “What I learned at my father’s camps and then what our camps are now like all about it’s really just Indigenous youth getting together and having a hockey school that is theirs. It’s kind of like a pow wow right? Like when you go to a pow wow all your people are there, all your cousins are there, all your family is there, and you just feel so much pride. And we’re kind of bringing that with our hockey schools” (Toronto Maple Leafs, 2022, 1:45).

The importance of finding strength through Indigenous family connections to the perseverance of not only Indigenous athletes but Indigenous Peoples is captured in these concluding thoughts from Ted Nolan, “If you want to go somewhere fast just go by yourself. But, if you want to go somewhere far we have to go together as a team. And going together as a team . . . you win championships. And going together as a people, you make the world a better place” (Toronto Maple Leafs, 2022, 4:15).

Centering Indigenous sport experiences provides a distinct opportunity to infuse the field of sport sociology with an Indigenous perspective, thus advancing the process of Indigenization. As such, the study of Indigenous sport can serve as a means of decolonizing sport sociology and creating space for Indigenous voices, knowledge, and practices to be recognized and valued.

Conclusion

Drawing on our collective experiences and expertise in Indigenous sport research, and Indigenous athlete activism, we sought to advance an analytical framework that centers on the protective factors of exercising sovereignty in Indigenous sport. By foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing and being and centering Indigenous experiences and voices, we hope to contribute to the Indigenization of sport sociology and support the ongoing struggles for Indigenous self-determination and liberation.

It is essential to acknowledge the impact of settler colonialism and ongoing colonial structures on Indigenous sport experiences. Sport sociologists must recognize the ways in which past and present colonial policies have shaped access to resources and opportunities for Indigenous communities and athletes, as well as how these policies have influenced the construction of dominant narratives around Indigenous sport. Indigenous sport experiences provide a unique opportunity to exercise sovereignty by reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous cultural practices, values, and knowledge. Through our research and experience, we have identified five protective factors that play a crucial role in Indigenous sport experiences: community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength. These protective factors are grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and are essential for the holistic well-being and success of Indigenous athletes and communities. By embodying these protective factors, Indigenous athletes are able to resist ongoing colonization and build a pathway toward the reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty.

In addition to the protective factors, the Indigenization of sport sociology is also an important component of exercising sovereignty. The centering of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in sport sociology research and practice allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts of Indigenous sport experiences. This in turn can lead to the development of more effective and culturally relevant interventions to address the systemic barriers and inequalities faced by Indigenous athletes and communities. The impetus of this work and future work is Indigenous youth empowerment. Embedding this Indigenist abundance-based analytical framework within youth activities and structuring youth programs where protective factors are amplified is the heart of this work, and a call to action for future applied research.

Future research can explore the application of this analytical framework in youth sports programs and activities. The incorporation of protective factors such as community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength can provide a supportive and empowering environment for Indigenous youth. Such programs can help foster a sense of belonging and connection to community, promote physical and mental health, and develop leadership and teamwork skills. This work can involve collaborating with Indigenous communities and organizations to cocreate and implement programs that align with their cultural values and traditions.
Another potential area for future research is the examination of the impact of this conceptual framework on Indigenous sport at a larger scale. This can involve exploring the experiences of Indigenous athletes in professional and amateur sports and assessing the role of protective factors in their success and well-being. Furthermore, research can investigate the ways in which this framework can be integrated into sport governance and policies to support Indigenous sport initiatives and the exercise of Indigenous sovereignty.

This analytical framework presents an opportunity to Indigenize the field of sport sociology and promote Indigenous youth empowerment through the cultivation of protective factors. The application of this framework can lead to transformative change in the representation and experiences of Indigenous Peoples in sports, as well as contribute to the broader decolonization and reconciliation efforts in society.

Overall, the protective factors of community, resilience, relationality, abundance, and strength are essential for Indigenous athletes to exercise their sovereignty and thrive in sport experiences. The Indigenization of sport sociology is also crucial for the recognition and empowerment of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in sport research. As we continue to navigate the complexities of sport and colonization, it is important to center Indigenous perspectives and Knowledge Systems, and to work toward a future where Indigenous athletes and communities can exercise their sovereignty and thrive in their sport experiences.

References


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