"Reasonable Amusements": Connecting the Strands of Physical Culture in Native Lives

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I have known Al Metcalfe since 1977 when I was a fourth-year physical education student looking for a graduate program in sport history. He drilled me with questions for two hours, and I knew I’d found my mentor. He had me working at NASSH in Windsor in the first week of my studies, and thus set up my relationship with him (and with NASSH) for the next twenty years.

He has been my mentor, my colleague, and my friend. I have not always agreed with him on matters, but I have never doubted the commitment to process that underlies all his actions. We share a passion for addressing inequalities, power relations, agency, and hegemony. I have learned about the north of England from him, and I trust he has developed a deeper understanding of indigenous peoples from me. We both have developed interests in the broader area of leisure practices, moving beyond the limiting confines of sport. We’ve argued about basic principles in the way that only true friends can—or care to.

Despite these similarities, we are different. He would never write this paper—his conservative treatment of historical information would not allow him to make the tentative claims I purport. He cautiously, meticulously, searches for truth; I explore the “truths” about history, which are always subject to interpretation and revision. Al and I approach our analysis in different ways, but we are joined in our commitment to produce work guided by fundamental questions. These questions connect this paper to Al’s academic work. I hope, thus, to honour Al and his life as a scholar, mentor, colleague, and friend.

Leisure and “The Other”

We come to know ourselves and others through physical leisure practices. These practices embody particular meanings for both participants and spectators. Retaining control over one’s physical culture, including its representations, is a very important part of cultural survival and self-determination.¹ Leisure, however, is a social practice constrained by the resources and opportunities

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available and shaped by the agency of individuals who express their “priorities, interests and values...reflect[ing] the way in which people organise their lives, express their autonomy and create meaning and significance for their actions.”

Thus, leisure “is always potentially an arena for cultural contestation between dominant and subordinate groups.”

Leisure is structured in particular ways over time. The ways in which spatial, temporal, and institutional boundaries come to be defined are integral to the meaning of leisure:

Not only a way of “doing” leisure has been instituted but a way of “seeing” leisure..... [Leisure must be analyzed in terms of how it became] defined in certain ways, whose definitions have counted and how such definitions are reproduced as part of the fabric of common-sense. If this is done, then what would otherwise be taken for granted as the social context of leisure becomes the social context which defines it.

Histories of Native involvement in sporting practices, traditional games, ceremonial, powwows, and rodeos all help illuminate an ongoing process wherein Euro-Americans have largely determined which physical leisure practices will be considered “legitimate” for Native participants. These histories also demonstrate the contested nature of such practices, as Native participants have at times acquiesced to, resisted, or accommodated the imposed expectations. Regardless of the responses, Native definitions of, and preferences for, physical activities have been shaped in the process.

Artificial boundaries have resulted from these histories, built on a Eurocentric conception of Native peoples as the “other.” Customary Native-derived (or indigenous) physical practices have been labelled “traditional” activities and accordingly banned, ignored, or encouraged as entertainment by non-Natives because of their “exotic” nature. Alternatively, customary Euro-American-derived practices have become naturalized as the standard by which “civilized” individuals are measured. Embodied physical acts, connected to an indigenous way of life, challenge rather than concur with naturalized Euro-American ways of life. For this reason, Native physical culture has remained a contested domain for broader race relations in society.

In this essay I explore a history of the organized physical leisure practices of Native North Americans, which takes into account the intersections, as well as some distinctions, between the various strands of physical culture. This rendering is based on the various histories that currently exist of each cultural practice, beginning in the late 1800s and continuing to the present, and it is placed within the changing societal context faced by Native peoples in North America.

Physical Cultural Practices: A Site for Assimilation

American government policy, beginning in 1871, operated under a philosophy that Native peoples could be legislated into becoming white Americans. For example, religious freedom was denied, dances and ceremonies were