The 1970s could be considered a "golden age" for Native sport in Canada. During this decade, federal bureaucrats and politicians demonstrated a commitment to Native sport through the funding of various initiatives. The Native Sport and Recreation Program was central to this era; through it, Native organizers across the country were able to work towards their own vision of sport. Over the nine years of this program, Native organizers at times resisted, as well as reproduced, the primarily Euro-Canadian vision within which this program was conceived and administered. An examination of the program's history provides interesting insights into possibilities for Native sport, as well as shifting perceptions of Native sport and recreation within the federal government.

Introduction of the Program

1970, Fitness and Amateur Sport released A Proposed Sports Policy for Canadians. This document outlined the need for greater government efforts in sport, fitness and recreation to ensure the "quality of life for Canadians...regardless of income or social position." In order to draw special attention to the less fortunate regions and classes of people in the country, officials of Fitness and Amateur Sport noted in this policy intention to consult with Indian and Metis brotherhoods, as well as agencies, to gather advice on departmental programs. This intention came to fruition once the Native Sport and Recreation Program was established—a program aimed at raising performance levels to the point where Native athletes could compete alongside other Canadians in elite events, while also providing services to a "disadvantaged" population.

Federal entry into the arena of Native sport was not unprecedented. In 1967, federal dollars had been used to fund "Corky the Floating Barge," which travelled down the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories throughout that summer, exposing Native people to Euro-Canadian swimming skills through the use of its above-ground pool. As well in 1967,
Native skiers began receiving federal assistance. A five year Natic Fitness Council grant was awarded to the Territorial Experimental Training Program, to assess if the motivation of Native youth generation could be improved through sport activity. This "pilot social development experiment" was justified by organizers as an attempt to socialize Native athletes through an elite, Euro-Canadian sport which was compatible with traditional Native ways. At the same time, this program provided opportunities for a "disadvantaged" group to compete in elite sport.

Federal support for Native athletes next became available through Arctic Winter Games. These Games, designed as a biennial northern sports competition for a "disadvantaged" region of Canada which could provide a "stepping stone" to elite competition, began in 1970 with financial assistance from the federal government. The Northern Games, comprised of traditional Inuit and Dene games, was begun that same year by northern Natives as a reaction against the Euro-Canadian bias of the Arctic Winter Games. Along with these Fitness and Amateur Sport-funded projects in northern Canada, the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs began providing a small per capita recreation grant to Status Indian Barrens on a yearly basis in 1968, "to enable them to develop and conduct programs of their own choice on the Reserve." It was within this context, that the idea of a national Native sport program emerged.

In 1969, John Munro, the Minister responsible for Fitness and Amateur Sport, was asked by Harold Cardinal to provide funds for an Alberta-based All-Indian Junior A Hockey team. Munro provided them with $60,000 that season, and decided that a broader sport and recreation program was needed for Native people. In March 1970, Munro proposed in Yellowknife that a demonstration project for isolated or Indian areas in the Prairies be organized. Three Prairie associations were subsequently approached to submit proposals. Armed with these documents, Fitness and Amateur Sport officials approached the federal Treasury Board for funding in September 1971. A lack of detail pertaining to the criteria for funding and concerns about overlap with existing federal services resulted in the Treasury Board rejecting this initial proposal.

The Deputy Minister responsible for Fitness and Amateur Sport turned to another Department to garner support. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, which was already funding Native recreation activities through a per capita grant, agreed to give a conditional endorsement to the proposal. However, they encouraged Fitness and Amateur Sport to provi