

## Sports as a Wholistic Connector of Aboriginal Family and Community

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The objective of this brief is to demonstrate how a sport plays a wholistic connector role for First Nations families and communities on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, Canada. For the purpose of this paper, the sport connector will be soccer and tournament events. These tournaments involve reuniting families and communities who have moved away from their respective traditional territories.

I am a member of the Musgamagw-Tsawatainuk Tribes of the Kwakwaka'wakw-speaking people. The last 25 years have found me in Victoria, BC, where I coach and play soccer. Currently, I am the Executive Director of a provincial Aboriginal Sport and Recreation Organization, and played the same role for the recent 1997 North American Indigenous Games. The following brief is based on my personal experiences, knowledge and observations of how soccer has played a positive role in individual, family, and community lifestyles.

In Canada there exists an Indian Act which identifies and defines who is an Indian. This definition includes such terminology as status, non-status, treaty, non-treaty, Metis, Inuit. The Indian Act also allocates a land base for status Indians. The land base units are called Reserves. This Act has categorized Indians who live outside of their home Reserves as Off-reserve Indians, and those Indians living on the home Reserves as On-reserve Indians. This paper will discuss only the Indian group or Tribes who speak Kwakwaka'wakw. This group comprises 27 Tribes, who are located around the northern portion of Vancouver Island and who make up the Kwakwaka'wakw, or the Kwakwaka'wakw-speaking Nation.

For health, education, social and family reasons members from Indian communities have moved or relocated from rural areas to urban centers. Victoria is the location for this presentation where both a women's and a men's T-Bird (Thunderbird) soccer team were formed. The T-Bird soccer teams have existed since 1972.

The initial development of this team was most informal and attracted soccer enthusiasts ranging from ages 12 to 40+. Fun and participation were the

primary focus. What resulted from such informal soccer interaction was social gatherings. These gatherings attracted individuals and families from many Tribal affiliations, but the majority came from the Kwakwala-speaking territories. This group development encouraged not only the formal development of soccer teams, but also cultural activities.

The formation of the Victoria Thunderbird Athletic and Cultural Society in 1972 created a foundation for Indian involvement in sport and culture in the urban setting. Soccer practices were scheduled to involve both women and men. This combination attracted not only the players, but also their family members. This created a positive forum for socialization and development of friendship. A strong sense of community evolved within the urban community of Victoria. In preparation for league and tournament play, fundraising functions and cultural activities took place throughout the year, creating a link between the social, cultural and sport activities.

In formalizing the soccer team, many positive aspects of personal development began to emerge. Hard work ethics, team spirit, discipline, teachings of respect, trust, integrity, honesty, esteem development, reinforcement of culture and identity, awareness of healthier lifestyle were offered. Many of the players from this team, as adults and parents, have exemplified these attributes.

Although this team played in the Victoria City soccer league, the primary events were the All-Native Soccer Tournaments. Separate from the mainstream soccer season, these Native tournaments had their own cycle during the year. The participants of these All-Native tournaments included Tribal Nations and individuals of Indian ancestry. A schedule of tournaments would occur each year, the first being the Easter Tournament hosted in Victoria, followed by many tournaments which would run through until August. These tournaments are run by Indian communities or families. Team entries would come from many different Indian communities or Reserves. A strong representation always comes from the Kwakwala-speaking Reserves. There were many communities that would enter more than one team. The sense of family affiliations would be reflected in team composition, which made Tribal competition intense.

Similar to the pattern of development of the T-Bird soccer team, these tournaments brought together communities with common backgrounds. Here again, a strong sense of friendship, identity, pride, and cultural reunification is reinforced.

When family members come from our tribal territories to participate in the Victoria tournaments, it is the T-Bird members who take these visitors into their homes. This, of course, reinforces tribal connections. When T-Bird members travel to tournaments closer to home, the hospitality is returned.

An annual soccer tournament called June Sports Day is hosted in Alert Bay. It has become the Soccer World Cup to members from that territory. As most members of the T-Bird soccer club come from around that territory, preparation intensifies and the competition level rises. Once again the power of sport and the power of culture is profiled. This tournament has invited its Tribal members to return home. This particular tournament solidifies family and tribal roots. From the T-Birds' perspective the tournament not only promotes roots and unification, but it also offers level of understanding of a lifestyle in an urban setting. This particular tournament has attracted its people home!

In conclusion, I have presented a brief on how the sport of soccer impacts on a group of First Nations people who have moved away from their tribal territory, and how soccer has brought them back home. I have also presented how soccer promotes positive personal, family, and community development. Finally, balance is demonstrated, as pride in identity and culture is fostered.