

Reclaiming Indigenous Cultural Spaces in Sports: Building on Our Traditional Teachings

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Maintaining ties to culture and traditional practices are fundamental values that are often shared and adapted by various Indigenous communities throughout Canada. Often, these cultural rituals and activities have the greatest benefit when practiced within a safe space, where individuals feel comfortable expressing and sharing their cultural identity. In sport settings, culturally safe spaces hold great value for many athletes, while also contributing to overall team and sport success. However, when these spaces are corrupted by systemic racism, indifference and intolerance, it produces an inhospitable environment for many Indigenous athletes who are seeking success in their sport. Therefore, there are six components identified within this review of Indigenous and Western literature that will be presented as a wholistic approach (Miles et al., 2023) to providing, incorporating, and promoting Indigenous cultural space within Canadian sporting systems.

Introduction

Systemic racism in Canadian sports continues to marginalise Indigenous athletes, making the creation of culturally safe spaces not just an act of inclusion, but a necessary strategy for resistance, resilience, and true team cohesion. In order to dismantle systemic racism and to facilitate education in sports, it may hold great value to offer cultural spaces to foster and support the athlete's own unique Indigenous identity. Providing this cultural space for athletes and teams may bring awareness to the strengths that come

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from cultural identity and the power of diversity, and has the potential to promote cultural pride, and help diminish indifference, intolerance, and injustice experienced in sports (Dubnewick et al., 2018). When an athlete's cultural diversity is embraced and understood as an important component of team building and team composition, then true team cohesion may exist. Team cohesion is the tendency of all athletes to stay united and consistent, in order to pursue a common need, objective, or goal (Carron et al., 2002). Moreover, true team cohesion is reimagining team culture where diversity is seen as a strength and recognising that enforced conformity to achieve team cohesion will not lead to a stronger team. It is the embracing and understanding of the strengths found in the expression of one's culture that empowers each person to be a champion and contributes to the overall success of the team.

Indigenous cultural space is personal, specific, and may include the integration of traditional practices and medicines, physical spaces, and virtual or digital communities. Historically and currently, Indigenous people's cultural ways to prepare for competition have seen barriers, such as when ways of preparing for competition differ from the 'norm' and are not understood nor accepted. By acknowledging and addressing these disconnections, sports organisations can foster environments where Indigenous athletes are not only included but thrive through the recognition and validation of their cultural identities.

These barriers may result in feeling alienated and uprooted from strengths-based traditional ways, as well as always being forced to advocate and explain their cultural views. Alienation occurs when a group considers an individual to be different and not the right type of person to fit in with the group (Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). In sports, the action of alienating an athlete may result in conscious or subconscious feelings of isolation from the team.

Methods

This article was created using an Indigenous methodology that was guided by diverse and wholistic perspectives. In addition, the term "wholistic" over "holistic" is used when discussing the creation of culturally safe spaces for Indigenous people (Miles et al., 2023). It is proposed in this article that the term "wholistic" includes the integration of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of well-being, which aligns more with most Indigenous worldviews of the whole being. In contrast, the term "holistic" is often associated with Western perspectives that may not capture the interconnectedness of all four components (Miles et al., 2023). By including "wholistic" approaches, sports programs may further respect and incorporate Indigenous values, creating environments that are inclusive and culturally safe.

Initially, a communal discussion was conducted to create and identify possible key elements for cultural space within the sporting context. An infographic was brought to life as a visual representation of the authors' findings that highlighted prominent Indigenous concepts ([Figure 1](#)). A turtle character was used to inspire the formation of the infographic, referencing Turtle Island from the traditional story of Sky Women (Yellowhorn & Lowinger, 2017). The specific components within the infographic are elaborated upon to further emphasize the details of each area of cultural space. The first infographic draft was then analysed and given constructive feedback from expert Indigenous athletes, and Indigenous advocates who are active community members. Additional Indigenous community members from Canada provided critiques to reflect a variety of diverse perspectives; however, this article is not meant to represent all Indigenous perspectives but only some Indigenous people's way of knowing what cultural space means for them in sports. Overall, this process displays a wholistic perspective that encompasses a collective Indigenous ideology and platform. This research uses a strengths-based perspective to validate the engagement and resurgence of Indigenous athletes and communities who have already been working to overcome such barriers.

Results

Aligning with their Human Rights, Indigenous peoples should be treated equally and be able to experience unlimited opportunities including, but are not limited to, the realm of sports. Furthermore, article number 31 from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008), proclaims it is the right of Indigenous peoples to practice, protect, maintain, and build upon their cultural practices, traditions, and knowledge, including sporting events. Therefore, by protecting and abiding these rights, all sporting activities and events should be held within culturally safe spaces, where all athletes and teams are recognised and treated with respect and equality.

In 2005, Sport Canada officially recognised Indigenous sporting organisations and systems, such as the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) and the Arctic Winter Games (Canadian Heritage, 2005; Forsyth & Giles, 2012). This relationship may be attributed to Sport Canada's policy, Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport, which was amended in 2015 (Canadian Heritage, 2005). The policy was designed to build inclusive relationships between Western sporting systems and Indigenous athletes and communities; however, this policy has been criticised for not adequately addressing the unequal power relations and ignoring complaints of racism (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). The term "Western" refers to the perspectives and worldviews that were created through the dominant ideology in North America after the colonisation of Turtle Island that now represents Canada, United States, and Mexico (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). Consequently, Indigenous advocates and organisations collaborated to identify inequities and systemic racism that

Indigenous peoples experience from Canadian governing bodies. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada identified 94 Calls to Action that still need to be fully implemented.

There have been progressive awakenings to the repercussions that racism has placed on the current social determinants of health and wellness. It has been suggested that racism should be considered its own social determinant for health and wellness (Mays et al., 2007; Paradies, 2006; Paradies et al., 2013; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Systemic racism may be policies, practices, needs, and values embedded in institutions, that reinforce the cultural values and norms of the historical majority. In Canada, these values and norms often reflect a Western perspective. This includes largescale and subtle, conscious and subconscious acts of racism based on exclusion and prejudice (Kennedy-Dubourdieu, 2006). It has been documented that Indigenous peoples experience barriers of indifference, intolerance, racism, and discrimination when seeking the inclusion and success in mainstream sports (Canadian Heritage, 2005). Indigenous athletes may feel stressed due to the obligation to constantly articulate and advocate for themselves, their culture, and their worldviews (Schinke et al., 2006). When these harsh experiences are endured, the consequent stories may be shared with the community and younger Indigenous athletes. These stories may become internalised and result in feelings of oppression. Fearful it could reflect the reality of their future endeavours; younger Indigenous athletes may feel the need to be extra vigilant to prevent victimisation and become hypersensitive; this could result in the loss of motivation for success or even quitting in the face of adversity (Forsyth & Giles, 2012).

Often when different cultural groups come together, individuals may either feel celebrated for their differences or encouraged to conform to the norm, placing less emphasis on their cultural practices and beliefs (Herberg, 1993). If the country or community with dominating cultural norms feels discomfort towards a person's race or cultural practices, often that individual's values will be neglected (Herberg, 1993). This can arise from preconceived beliefs about a culture that may be rooted in racial stereotyping (Herberg, 1993). Indifference may be seen as rejecting others' cultural perspectives and ways of knowing when they differ from the norm (Tirone, 1999). The mainstream sporting system has been criticised for its Western values and perspective and acting indifferent towards Indigenous cultures and their way of understanding and valuing sports (Paraschak & Tirone, 2008). Due to this Western mono-perspective sporting structure that is dominated by Eurocentric ideas, attempts to include culturally diverse athletes may be potentially viewed as superficial and insensitive; in essence, not authentically inclusive (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). The normalisation of hazing within mainstream sporting culture may create inhospitable environments for Indigenous athletes (Salinas & Boettcher, 2018). Allen and Madden (2008) defined hazing as activities that embarrass, offend, harm, or take advantage

of an individual whose participation is required to become initiated into a group. McGlone and Schaefer (2008), explain the classification of hazing as being either physical or mental, emphasising that mental hazing is often overlooked. Generally, with mental or emotional hazing, physical injuries are not always visible and therefore it may have the potential to be even more dangerous due to being severely underreported (McGlone & Schaefer, 2008). Hazing is used to instil the values and perspectives of the majority group, which in sports reflects a distinctly Westernised view (Josefowitz & Gadon, 1989). Therefore, individuals whose race and beliefs may not mirror this majority, tend to experience more acts of hazing and indifference from that majority group (Josefowitz & Gadon, 1989). For some culturally diverse individuals, including many Indigenous athletes, hazing may have the potential to marginalise and alienate athletes within their own sports team because the mandatory activities go against their beliefs, morals, values, or cultural identity (Forsyth & Giles, 2012).

The following paragraph is a personal experience lived by one of the authors in this article. It is acknowledged that this may create a bias that has the potential to be a limitation. On the other hand, her experiences are essential when demonstrating the severity and repercussions that may result when a team of athletes, coaching staff, and sporting institutions act indifferent to Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and perspectives. Waneek Horn-Miller is proud to be a Mohawk athlete from Kahnawake and has competed at an elite level in sport (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). Waneek Horn-Miller is dedicated to using cultural practices throughout her career as a Water Polo player and coach, as it strengthens her performance and cultural ties (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). She has competed in events such the Pan American Games in 1999 and the Sydney Summer Olympics in 2000, which brought her to an international platform to support and advocate for Indigenous rights for athletes (Forsyth & Giles, 2012; Leatherdale & Charleyboy, 2014). In 2003, Waneek Horn-Miller was suddenly cut from Team Canada for not conforming to the team's sporting culture (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). This action led to a Human Rights claim determining that Team Canada's decision was racially motivated (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). As a result of this dispute, Waneek was not allowed to return to the Canadian Water Polo Team, and her coaches and teammates were mandated to complete cultural sensitivity training (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). This is a key example that shows how sporting systems may be one of many instigators for acts of indifference through inadequate cultural sensitivity training of their coaches and unattainable realities of perfect team cohesion. This short anecdote exemplifies a personal experience lived by Waneek Horn-Miller, however, there may be various other encounters of indifference experienced by other Indigenous athletes.

Being intolerant of someone's cultural ways of knowing may occur when personal cultural views are so prominent that they filter out the perspectives of others (Cohen, 1998). There is potential for tension and mistreatment of culturally diverse individuals when the team struggles to understand and empathise with different cultures, therefore suppressing ones that do not align with their own (Cohen, 1998). Intolerance, such as joking, has been conditioned institutionally by Western sporting systems to enforce the rules and customs of sports (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). Athletes may view hazing as a positive way to promote team cohesion, which encourages unity in the group; however, those in positions of power may be intolerant of other's beliefs (Allan & Madden, 2008). In some cases, sports may be used as a tool in attempts to disengage and disassociate Indigenous individuals from their culture and ways of knowing (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). Lacrosse may be viewed by some Indigenous communities as the Haudenosaunee game of Creation due to its grounding in cultural and spiritual knowledge, potentially helping to maintain critical connections to Creation (Downey, 2018). Despite this, Canadian agencies, Indian Residential schools, and the past Department of Indian Affairs historically manipulated the sport of lacrosse to be a way of teaching Indigenous children the Western rules and expectations of morality, gender, language, and what it means to belong to the Canadian society (Downey, 2018). Aligning with the goals of the Department of Indian Affairs, the government attempted to distance generations from their cultural realities and establish cultural intolerance through sport (Downey, 2018).

Within the International sporting systems, Hapeta and Palmer's (2014) case study of New Zealand Super XV rugby team, the Chiefs, whose victories coincided with a fundamental shift in team culture. This shift was driven by a leadership approach that embraced *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledges) and the cultural identity of their *rohe* (region), grounding their team ethos in Māori customs and values. By creating a culturally safe space to integrate cultural values into their game preparation, strategies, and post-match celebrations, the Chiefs cultivated a team environment that was reflective of Indigenous knowledge systems. This story underscores the argument that embracing cultural identity within sport does not weaken cohesion—it strengthens it by fostering genuine team unity and a shared sense of purpose. Their adoption of *mātauranga Māori* was not a superficial gesture but a transformative framework that informed leadership strategies, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships within the team. The literature review by Watene, Hapeta, & Jackson (2023), directly connects to the discussion of Indigenous cultural space in sport by highlighting how *wāhine Māori* (Māori women) in rugby face systemic barriers when their cultural identities are not fully integrated into team environments. Indigenous athletes, like Ngata-Aengamate, often experience alienation when their cultural expressions are tokenised rather than embraced, reflecting the broader issue of Indigenous ways of knowing being undervalued in mainstream

sports institutions. The study calls for Māori-led and culturally informed sporting structures, reinforcing the argument that Indigenous cultural spaces—whether physical, virtual, or tied to traditional practices—must be actively integrated into training and competition.

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Similarly, Stewart-Withers et al. (2025)'s commentary, 'Tino Rangatiratanga: Indigenous (Māori) Sovereignty and the Messy Realities of Reconciliation Efforts at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup', highlights the tension between symbolic gestures and meaningful reconciliation in global sports. While FIFA incorporated Indigenous representation through flags, language, and ceremonies, the Spanish team's mockery of the haka (can be ceremonial dances or challenges) *Ka Mate* exposed the superficiality of these efforts. This mirrors the experiences of wāhine Māori in rugby (Watene et al., 2023), where Indigenous identities are often tokenised rather than fully integrated. The eventual apology by Spanish captain Ivana Andrés during a pōwhiri (formal Māori welcome ceremony) and the symbolic jersey gift were attempts at reconciliation but underscored the burden on Indigenous communities to educate others. True tino rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty) in sport requires more than apologies—it demands structural change that embeds Indigenous self-determination and leadership (Stewart-Withers et al., 2024). Without this shift, Indigenous athletes will continue to navigate systems that prioritise performative inclusion over genuine respect and equity.

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Many Indigenous athletes have found it essential to develop coping strategies to overcome racism, indifference, and intolerance within their sporting environments. For example, Eugene Arcand, a Cree elite hockey player from Saskatchewan, mentioned that due to his fear of anti-Indigenous spectators, he held his hockey stick with him for protection in the arena (McKegney & Auksi, 2019). Many Indigenous athletes, like Eugene Arcand, may not feel the support from their team when they are treated like outsiders, and consequently such athletes may employ an active response to racism (Schinke et al., 2010). It is described in the article by Schinke et al. (2010) that an active response to racism is when an individual takes control of the situation themselves. For instance, an athlete may take an active response by directly confronting the racist individual, explaining how those comments are rooted in bias and stereotype and are not welcomed in any setting (Schinke et al., 2010). With this in mind, having these safe cultural spaces may assist in minimising the occurrence of racism that Indigenous athletes may face in their sports settings.

Racial barriers have been recognised at all levels of sports in Canada (Paraschak & Tirone, 2008). Schinke et al. (2010) highlights the racism that was directed towards Indigenous youth hockey players from Wikwemikong, when competing off reserves or outside of Indigenous communities. These acts included, racial slurs said by the opposing teams, fans who threw waste onto the ice, referees who used inappropriate language when addressing the Indigenous players, and ignorant sports authorities or officials who choose to disregard such complaints (Schinke et al., 2010). For these reasons, Indigenous athletes are taught or have learned to culturally desensitise and distance themselves from their cultural realities in order to assimilate to their team culture (Downey, 2018; Schinke et al., 2010).

In practice and competition, Indigenous athletes may thrive to seek a wholistic balance of spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health and wellness to excel in their sports (Downey, 2018). Cultural practices that are rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing contribute to each element of health and wellness, and in turn, may strengthen and prepare the athlete for success. Encouraging and empowering Indigenous athletes to aspire to be their strongest selves will benefit the entire sporting community, including individual competitors and teams. In contrast to individual sports, team sports may require a feature of cohesion that emerges each player into a

unified team (Carron et al., 2002). When given the opportunity, Indigenous athletes may enrich their team spirit and overall sporting environment as they bring their traditional worldviews, cultural perspectives, resilience, and strengths from ties to their community (Downey, 2018).

Discussion

Within all levels of sports, cultural spaces should be provided for athletes and teams to spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically connect to their family and community's traditions. These practices may encourage athletes to feel grounded within their strengths-based state of being at the most fundamentally safe levels. Universally, sports may be used to bring people together to create success, common ground, and unity. In addition, sports may empower Indigenous individuals and encourage personal growth (Downey, 2018). In contrast, many diverse Indigenous perspectives may view sports as an opportunity to share cultural values and implement teachings, while using a wholistic outlook that highlights the strengths of Indigenous athletes (Erueti & Palmer, 2014). This article is structured around the Indigenous outlook for sport and long-term athlete development (Hoffman, 2013) and will initiate a novel discussion about how Indigenous cultures may be accepted and appreciated in Canadian sporting systems and structures.

The knowledge in this article was translated using an Indigenous perspective and an infographic was created by Indigenous graphic designer, Alice Joe, to conceptualise the specific elements of cultural space needing to be addressed in the Canadian sporting context (refer to [Figure 1](#)).

The turtle is used as a metaphor in this framework to represent Indigenous resilience, identity, and the journey of navigating Western sporting systems while carrying cultural knowledge and traditions. Each component of the turtle is interconnected: the head symbolises vision and the guidance of Two-Eyed Seeing related to advocacy and education, the body (shell) represents wholistic health and wellness, the four flippers (legs) traditional practice, traditional medicine, physical space, and digital and virtual community, reflecting adaptability and movement through challenges, and the tail signifies direction for understanding intentions.

Traditional Practice

Traditional ways of knowing and being often hold great value for many generations of Indigenous athletes, contributing to the ongoing need for cultural spaces in sport settings. Cultural ways of knowing and being are often shared and learned through the practice of past and present traditional ceremonies (McCabe, 2017). It is important to appreciate and respect the diversity of Indigenous Nations, which leads to a widespread and diverse assortment of practices and values as opposed to a universal Pan-Indigenous ideology (Frideres, 2008). Traditional practices and ceremonies emanate from rich Indigenous history and may be sacred to the individual and their

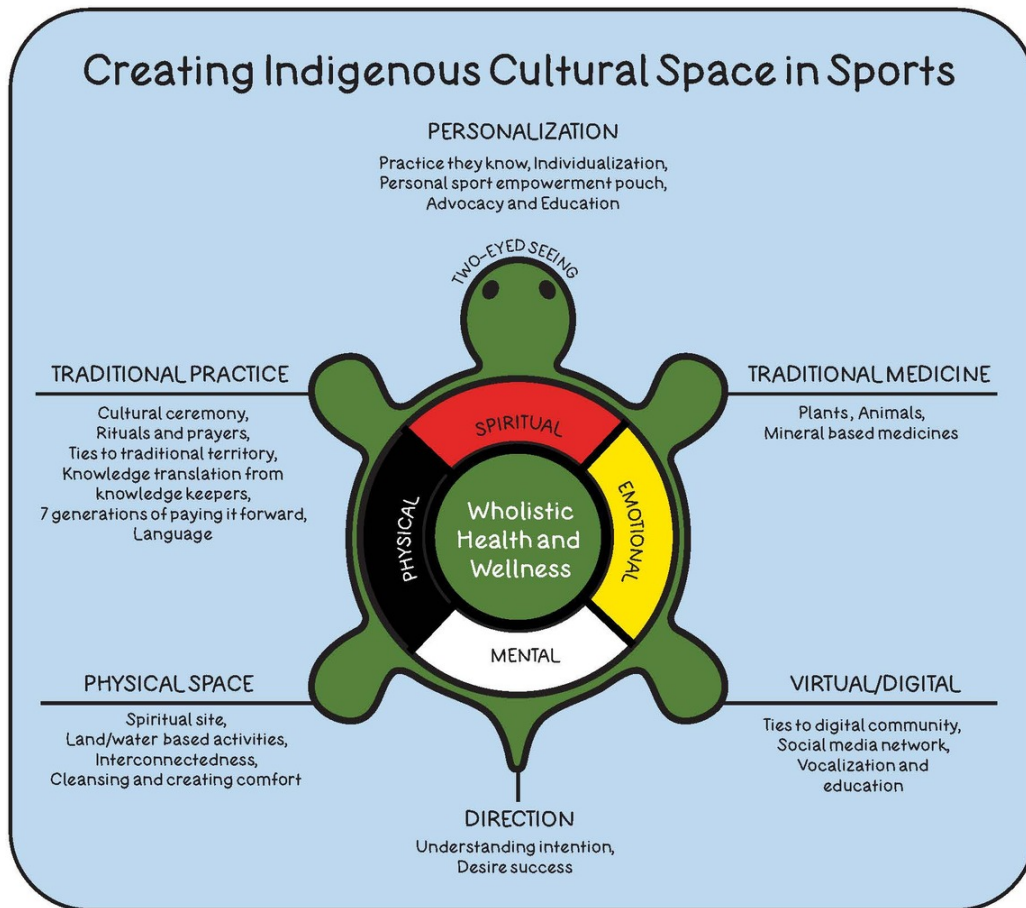


Figure 1. Indigenous Cultural Space Diagram within Turtle Island

community (Moodley & West, 2005). For some Indigenous peoples, ceremonies are traditional and powerful events that allow one to maintain connections with Creation (Patrick, 2019). Ceremonies are often practiced to sustain and stabilise connections to cultural traditions that may be grounding and empowering for athletes. Patrick (2019) recognised that from the Dakelh perspective, ceremonial experiences may be created using one's own knowledge while also considering the Dakelh culture. Families from different Nations have a variety of cultural beliefs and practice ceremonial and spiritual traditions such as, sweat lodges, smudging, fasting, or celebrating different milestones of life (Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), 2015). Ceremonies have been viewed to be offerings from Creation that empower Indigenous peoples to continue to thrive utilising their traditional practices (OHRC, 2015). Specifically, for youth, ceremonies may be essential events that have the potential to empower and support future generations in discovering and valuing their own Indigeneity with ties to past generations (OHRC, 2015). These practices may be used to reconcile the intergenerational trauma that many Indigenous peoples have encountered throughout history and in present day (TRC of Canada, 2015). In a sporting context, cultural resurgence and reclamation has been demonstrated by many Indigenous athletes in response to societal and athletic challenges. For

example, elite Mohawk kayaker Alwyn Morris held an eagle feather while being awarded his gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games (Meissner, 2009). Morris's feather salute was a traditional symbol that he used to demonstrate his strong Indigenous connections and to recognise his Mohawk roots (Jones & Ferris, 2017). Cultural ceremonies may be performed to strengthen one's belonging and Indigeneity, which may contribute to creating a warrior like spirit embodied by some Indigenous athletes in sports (Donahue, 1997; Klaws, 2013).

Indigenous community members, Elders, or Knowledge Keepers often incorporate cultural practices into family or community gatherings to share teachings, reinforce cultural practices, and encourage wholistic health and wellness at a community level (Cajete, 1994). Cultural rituals may be adapted to accommodate specific events or ceremonies such as healing, hunting, or competition (Cajete, 1994; R. M. Wright, 2020). Rituals and prayers also allow some Indigenous peoples the opportunity to connect to their history and community at a more intimate level. For example, Elder Dave Courchene is a Knowledge Keeper of the Anishinaabe Nation, who travels internationally to exemplify the importance of rituals and prayers to help maintain Indigenous cultural practices and sensitivity at large-scale events (University of Winnipeg, n.d.). Elder Courchene has been recognised for his sharing of Anishinaabe traditions which include, establishing prayers through water and pipe ceremonies (Cameron et al., 2019).

All Indigenous land holds history, traditions, and spiritual significance for the entire community (Zurba & Friesen, 2014). Therefore, Indigenous peoples are motivated to maintain ties to traditional land and territories as they are able to draw into the power and spirituality that come from their community and the past generations.

Elders are the traditional Knowledge Keepers for Indigenous peoples, as over their lifetime they have experienced and shared traditional cultural practices and teachings (Archibald, 2001). Elders translate their beliefs of cultural teachings through lived stories and experiences which help to inspire later generations to foster their own sense of Indigeneity and identity (Archibald, 2001). In addition, communities may have Knowledge Keepers who share specific Indigenous community teachings and experiences and may not be seen as an Elder yet (Wilson & Henderson, 2014).

The strong intergenerational connections enable future generations to maintain traditions and cultural rituals through their beliefs and the land they occupy (Jojola, 2013). Indigenous peoples apply the knowledge from seven generations to pay forward, guide, and maintain their cultural practices for future generations. The Seventh Generation Principle (Fish et al., 2023) is a guiding philosophy rooted in Haudenosaunee teachings, emphasising that decisions made today should consider their impact on the next seven

generations. It reflects a deep sense of responsibility for the well-being of future generations, requiring long-term thinking and collective accountability to the past generations.

In today's society, Indigenous languages and cultural practices on Turtle Island have been a challenge to accomplish due to the effects of colonisation over the centuries (Huia, 2014). Indigenous peoples have advocated their strong emotional and spiritual connections to language as it is a key element in developing their identity, title, and rights (Cutknife, 2018; Huia, 2014). Language is one of the best methods to display and practice a culture, because of its ability to translate one's beliefs with ease (Huia, 2014). Some Indigenous communities who have promoted the resurgence of cultural competency for their youth, have seen a reduction in adolescent suicide rates observed in these communities (Chandler et al., 2003). This study by Chandler et al. (2003) identified language as an important category of cultural competency. Therefore, having the ability to practice language may help to connect with one's traditional teachings, aiding to envision and create cultural space.

Traditional Medicine

The inclusion of traditional medicines and its variety of forms may play a key role for such ceremonies (Reeves & Stewart, 2017). As athletes and coaches value health and wellness to succeed in their chosen sports, traditional medicine may remind them of Indigenous cultural health values (Chandler et al., 2003). When implementing a holistic outlook on health, plants may be used as a medicinal way to connect with the spiritual world, lending to one's overall health and wellness (Cariou, 2018). Sacred plants such as sweetgrass, sage, cedar, and tobacco are commonly used for different occasions, such as smudging ceremonies (OHRC, 2015). Indigenous athletes may benefit from using traditional plant-based medicines to heal, prepare for competition, and/or other personal reasons.

Animals are an important part of culture and nutrition for many Indigenous communities. For example, peoples from the Coastal and Interior areas of British Columbia rely primarily on their ability to catch and eat salmon, as it is a staple food in their diet (First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), 2014a). The process of catching fish may unite families by gathering and preserving nutrients for their community and economy (FNHA, 2014a). Traditionally, peoples from the Bella Coola region return the bones of the salmon they catch to the waters that they came from, as this practice follows the legend of Raven and Salmon People (Kirk, 1986). Hunting camps for moose and deer are traditionally located on various lands, following the cultural knowledge from skilled hunters passed from generation to generation (FNHA, 2014a). Indigenous peoples, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, often use bows, arrows, spears, knives, and traps to traditionally hunt (FNHA, 2014a). Similar to many Indigenous athletes,

hunters prepare themselves spiritually prior to initiating a hunt (FNHA, 2014a). During celebratory ceremonies, traditional animal hide drums are often paired with singing and dancing rituals and accompany sporting events, such as the NAIG.

Dr. Georgia Kyba, a Traditional Wellness Advisor at the University of British Columbia, defined traditional medicine, as knowledge, beliefs, and approaches to health that utilise plants, animals, and mineral-based medicines, aligning with a wholistic model of health (Kyba, 2010). With respect to enriching culture, Indigenous peoples aspire to enhance the acceptance of traditional medicines and practices (FNHA, 2014b). When Western sport implements cultural spaces, it is vital to accept that traditional medicines may be used to facilitate these safe spaces.

Physical Space

Traditional land and physical spaces are commonly used as the foundation for hosting sporting events; however, these events would benefit from accepting the cultural values of their athletes which would lead to a stronger connection and appreciation to the natural world. Landscapes, such as forests and fields, are often the settings for Indigenous cultural gatherings and play an incredibly large role in the sharing of spiritual values (Lewis & Sheppard, 2005). The Chiefs of Ontario explained how the relationships in which Indigenous peoples share with the land they live on, has deep connections since time immemorial and are integral to how they identify themselves (OHRC, 2015). The locations and objects used in traditional ceremonies and rituals are sacred spiritual items for Indigenous peoples (OHRC, 2015). Any individual who chooses to use sacred sites and items should do so with reverence and respect, as they are integral in Indigenous spirituality (OHRC, 2015). This expands to include sporting events, which are often situated on sacred Indigenous lands and therefore should follow the local Indigenous principles and protocols. When athletes seek sites for their cultural practices, it is appropriate to offer physical space designated for Indigenous peoples to practice protocols.

For some Indigenous peoples, typical land or water-based activities include hunting or fishing for resources, cultivating land and materials, and participating in traditional harvesting practices (OHRC, 2015). Many Indigenous communities have expressed that the use of cultural activities have positive effects on physical and mental health and wellbeing (Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2017; McIvor et al., 2013; Oster et al., 2014). Specifically, research has reported a lower number of youth suicides in places with thriving land and/or water-based activities that shared knowledge of local Indigenous languages (Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019).

Indigenous knowledge is interconnected with the traditional land in which an activity has or will take place (Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019). Land is necessary for many culturally safe activities, such as ceremonies, traditional foods, and learning (Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019). As there are many sporting events and facilities in urban areas, past research has acknowledged the opportunity to decolonise using land-based approaches by creating cultural spaces for some Indigenous peoples (Bang et al., 2014). Furthermore, creating a place for culture within land-based activities may benefit all people involved in the experience (Schultz et al., 2016). In essence, a connection to traditional land may be a facilitator to fostering cultural spaces, including sporting events.

Virtual and Digital

In today's society, when some Indigenous athletes are away from their communities for sporting events, virtual and digital resources have become essential for fostering and maintaining connections to their cultural spaces. Virtual spaces, like Facebook and Instagram, are commonly used by athletes to share their experiences and show their support for social media movements (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Networks, such as television, provide a digital platform for athletes to broadcast their athletic journeys and share life lessons with a global audience (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Those who originally practiced within Indigenous communities often experience and benefit from the interwoven threads of support from family, Elders, sporting staff, and other community members through virtual spaces (Schinke et al., 2010). Many professional and elite Indigenous athletes have vocalised that the continuous support of their communities is an adaptive and effective strategy to overcoming the challenges and barriers that they face while competing in Western sporting events (Light et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2006, 2010). Specifically, Wikwemikong athletes from Northern Ontario often share their stories and strategies with local youth during annual presentations (Schinke et al., 2010). Nationally, The Indigenous Peoples Television Network, a Canadian Broadcasting channel, reclaims success of Indigenous elite athletes back to their communities (Hafsteinsson & Bredin, 2010). In 2010, this channel broadcasted the Vancouver Winter Olympics in English, French, and eight Indigenous languages (Hafsteinsson & Bredin, 2010). With current technology, when a sporting environment lacks acceptance of different Indigenous cultures, many athletes thrive by seeking motivation from their community using digital methods.

Overseeing and controlling the narrative of Indigenous affairs hold great value for many Indigenous communities (Hafsteinsson & Bredin, 2010). Social media is an avenue for athletes to self-determine their preferred narration and documentation of their athletic journey. When there are few established communities or resources for cultural space, Indigenous athletes may perceive a sporting loss or set-back as a failure to the entire culture (Schinke et al., 2010). Social networks have been used to overcome this obstacle by

allowing community members to share unconditional love and support from afar, despite the outcome in competition (Schinke et al., 2010). When local community-based news feeds proudly feature Indigenous athletes, it enhances the athlete's sense of belonging and accomplishment (Schinke et al., 2010).

In the TRC of Canada (2015) document, Calls to Action number 87 and 91 highlighted the need to increase engagement and respect for Indigenous peoples in Western sporting events, including the Olympics, Pan American Games, and Commonwealth Games. These Calls to Action bring awareness to the lack of cultural space for Indigenous athletes and communities at these accomplished and high-profile events. Call to action number 88, focuses on athlete development and growth at the provincial and territorial levels, which also includes events such as the NAIG (TRC of Canada, 2015). Furthermore, calling for long-term financial support from the Canadian government may help to create the support needed for some Indigenous athletes to be able to practice within their community, where cultural space already exists (Schinke et al., 2006).

Personalisation

Creating Indigenous cultural space is a very individual task, and may involve a combination of cultural, traditional, and wholistic ways to connect with one's culture at sporting events. The head of the Turtle in [Figure 1](#), Indigenous Cultural Space Diagram, symbolises the importance of this approach being individual and based on one's own cultural and traditional understandings. The process is self-interpreted and individualised and is created to reflect one's cultural upbringing rooted in history, teachings, and self-awareness. The words that people choose to use to express themselves are the foundation to cultural languages and may allow people to stay grounded in their family roots (Neuhaus, 2013). Words are medicine and may influence the way people respond and internalise the sporting environment. When personalising cultural space, the language that each individual chooses to use reflects their community, own beliefs, environment, and traditions. Ideally, Indigenous languages should be seen as a significant tool that may offer guidance when personalising cultural space.

The Indigenous Cultural Space Diagram includes a turtle whose eyes signify the value of having and using a Two-Eyed Seeing approach when developing one's cultural space. Two-Eyed Seeing often refers to the importance of maintaining and balancing traditional Indigenous ways of knowing as well as Western values and practices (Bartlett et al., 2012). Elder Albert from the Mi'kmaw Nation highlighted that being aware of both perspectives may allow for an individual to draw more knowledge from either perspective and depending on the circumstances, one may lean on a perspective more when it is deemed to have greater strengths and benefits (Bartlett et al., 2012). The Two-Eyed Seeing perspective is originally a Haudenosaunee approach to

valuing both Indigenous and Western knowledges (Hovey et al., 2017) and can be advantageous because of its strengths-based view of both types of knowledges (A. L. Wright et al., 2019).

One of the most important aspects when creating a cultural space is the process of individualising such practices to meet one's own competitive experience. Cultural practices are often very meaningful to individuals and represent what they know and trust about their cultural beliefs. In sports, specifically, it is common for all individuals to have routines and practices in order to create a sense of safety, strength, and empowerment for competition. For example, some Indigenous peoples may carry a medicine bag or other cultural objects that they may wear to sports competition. This medicine bag may create a sense of grounding, protection, or connection to cultural teachings they have been taught. Accessing spiritual strength is often a missing element of training for elite athletes at sports practice or competition. However, recognising the need for and the creation of cultural spaces may empower and elicit greater success for the athlete as well as growth and strength of the team culture. Once there are supports and resources available to set up cultural spaces, it is crucial that Indigenous peoples are empowered to practice traditional teachings to support their journey in sports.

Direction

The last component of the Indigenous Cultural Space Diagram ([Figure 1](#)) is the tail of the turtle, which is providing the forward direction by moving through the flowing water. This symbolises the progress in which people are working and moving towards shared goals over time. By creating cultural space, it might encourage Indigenous peoples to form a distinct understanding of their personal aspirations and be able to follow their desired paths. Often this path has a common desired goal of success, whether that is in life or in sports.

Conclusions

The Canadian sporting systems and communities need to take accountability and responsibility for the ongoing existence of systemic racism within its institutions, procedures, and structures. The systemic racism expressed as indifference, intolerance, and outright racism towards Indigenous athletes need to be proactively dismantled by working with Indigenous communities and their athletes. Developing strategies to address systemic racism and support the TRC of Canada Calls to Action will be a step in the right direction to fostering culturally safe spaces. Building strength and success for Indigenous athletes, coaches, and sporting staff may enrich the sporting world with new ways of knowing and valuing. For some Indigenous athletes, a cultural space may be conceptualised to follow their cultural and traditional teachings of wholistic health and wellness. This wholistic outlook can be applied, and is not limited to, traditional practices, physical spaces, traditional

spaces, and/or virtual and digital spaces. This outlook is not a uniform process for all athletes, and therefore it is important to encourage and adapt to individual personalisation when sporting systems or Indigenous advocates apply this framework. More community-based research is needed and valued when trying to advocate for the Calls to Actions from the TRC of Canada, leading to tangible changes to Canadian sporting systems. These findings should be understood and elaborated upon to include all peoples within minority groups, such as People of Colour and the LGBTQIA2S+ communities to celebrate diverse ways of knowing and to be connected to community. This article conceptualised cultural space from an Indigenous perspective in hopes that it would promote discussion around the power and inclusion of diverse ways of knowing that would advocate for and promote culturally safe spaces for all cultures.

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