Historica Canada Education Portal

First Nations Athletes, in History and in the Media: Tom Longboat and Steve Collins

Overview

This lesson plan is based on viewing the Footprint videos for Tom Longboat and Steve Collins. Collins and Longboat are just two of the many Aboriginal athletes — others include Adam Rita, Ted Nolan, Owen Nolan, Bryan Trottier, George Armstrong, Waneek Horn Miller, Alwyn Morris, and Darren Zack — who have achieved major success in the international sporting world, despite the significant obstacles they had to overcome.

Aims

To increase student awareness of Aboriginal athletes' contribution to Canadian sport, particularly those of Onondaga runner Tom Longboat and Ojibwa ski-jumper Steve Collins; to encourage a critical understanding of the particular challenges Aboriginal athletes faced in the past and continue to face today to assess the extent to which those challenges reflect larger social problems inherent in Canada's relationships with its Aboriginal peoples.

Background

In the fall of 2003, when he stepped onto the ice for the Nashville Predators, forward Jordin Tootoo became the first Inuk athlete to play in the National Hockey League. Much media attention recognized this achievement, which followed in the wake of a long history of incredible accomplishments by both Inuk and First Nations athletes in Canada. These accomplishments are all the more impressive because they have taken place in the midst of our nation's long and difficult relationship with its Indigenous peoples.

Today, few people remember that only a century ago Aboriginal peoples were generally thought to be some of the greatest athletes in the world. Prior to the First World War, many First Nations communities in Canada were as prosperous as the white, European communities that surrounded them. From these communities would come a number of incredible lacrosse players and long distance runners who were celebrities of their times. Because of their success and because of the rampant racism of the time, however, First Nations athletes were both resented by Europeans who refused to compete in head-to-head competitions with them, and despised as an inferior people. Nonetheless, athletes like the great Seneca runner Deerfoot, and the runners Keraronwe and Peter Thomas would both amaze and challenge audiences until the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Though most young Canadians have never heard of Tom Longboat, in the early twentieth century he was one of the most famous athletes in the western world. Like fellow Aboriginal runner Jim Thorpe in the United States, Tom Longboat was the Markus Naslund or Shaquille O'Neal of his time. Throughout his career however, and despite his global renown, Longboat was continually dogged by questionable and often racist coverage by early twentieth century mass media. This coverage actually

reflected the general attitudes of Canadian society at the time. What was strange is that Longboat's achievements as a runner followed decades of success by Aboriginal athletes in races across North America and in Europe. This success would prepare the ground for the accomplishments of Longboat, but it would not undo the legacy of a toxic racism that framed First Nations people as inferior and undeserving of the success they fought to achieve.

Tom Longboat was born to a poor family of farmers in the Six Nation Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy, near Brantford, Ontario, on 4 July 1887. A member of the Onondaga Nation, he lived at home until the age of nine and attended band school where, after his father's premature death, he often skipped class for long periods to help his mother with work on the farm. At the age of twelve, like most Onondaga children, he was enrolled at the Mohawk Institute, a residential school for Aboriginal children run by the Anglican Church. Longboat despised the school, where teachers forced children to speak English, despite the fact that all its pupils were Indigenous. The teachers also attempted to persuade Longboat to give up his centuries old longhouse religion in favour of Christianity. A first attempt to escape landed Longboat in serious trouble. A second attempt led him to the home of his uncle, who agreed to hide the boy on the condition that Longboat went to work for him on his farm. Longboat happily agreed. After he became famous, Longboat was invited to return to the Mohawk Institute to speak. Because of the treatment he had received at his former school, he refused, saying privately, "I wouldn't even send my dog to that place."

Inspired by Bill Davis, a Mohawk runner from Ohsweken, Longboat entered his first competition — the five-mile Victoria Day race — in 1905. Though no one had ever heard of the young athlete, Longboat finished second and collected a small prize. Encouraged to continue running by

Davis — who had finished second in the Boston marathon in 1906 — Longboat entered the Hamilton "Around-the-Bay" race in October of 1906. At that time running was a highly popular spectator sport — in part because of the amount of legal betting that took place at competitive races. In the Hamilton race, the odds against Longboat were 100-1. Despite this and despite taking a wrong turn during the competition, Longboat stunned the running world and his fellow runners when he won the race by nearly four minutes.

After seven races in Ontario, Longboat entered the 1907 Boston Marathon — at the time the most prestigious of all road races — as the odds-on favourite. In front of 100,000 spectators, Longboat defeated 123 other runners and smashed the previous marathon record by almost five minutes, running the final 1.6 kilometres uphill, into a snow squall, in four minutes, forty-seconds. A parade of 200,000 people greeted Longboat on his return to Toronto where he was presented with medals, the key to the city, and the promise from Toronto city council of a cash award of $500.

Despite this adoring reception and his massive popularity, the media's treatment of Longboat in the early decades of the twentieth century revealed a racism not very different than what he faced at the Mohawk Institute. After his Boston triumph, the Toronto Daily Star wrote, "His trainers are to be congratulated ... on having such a docile pupil. It is to be hoped that Longboat's success will not develop obstinacy on his part and that he will continue to be manageable." Writing that the road race champion of the world's chief attribute was his docility and manageability effectively strips Longboat of all responsibility for his victory and equates him with a trained animal. It is a trope that allows the newspaper to give all the credit for his victory to Longboat's (European Canadian) trainers, and thus turn a First Nations athlete's landmark achievement into a confirmation of Aboriginal inferiority.

This example is typical of the newspaper coverage Longboat received throughout his career. Described as a "lanky, raw-boned, headstrong Redskin"' who "galloped" (as opposed to ran) the story of Tom Longboat in the press almost always cast the runner as an animal, rather than human being. Toronto Star Sports writer Lou Marsh described Longboat as "the original dummy.... wily... unreliable... as hard to train as a leopard." When, as a professional runner, Longboat fired his Irish-Canadian manager in favour of a Mohawk friend, local reverend John Morrow opined that, "the physical and mental make-up of the Indian [sic] is ... foreign to any other athlete's, and his disposition so hard at times to understand." After Longboat married a Mohawk woman, Lauretta Maracle, the Toronto Globe seemed pleased that the new bride "does not like to talk of feathers, war paint or other Indian paraphernalia.... If anyone can make a reliable man... of that elusive human being, it will be his wife."

After a successful professional career, in which Longboat ran a series of blockbuster one-on-one long distance races against British star Alf Shrubb, the phenomenal popularity of running competitions began to decline. Longboat enlisted voluntarily for service in the First World War, fighting a war for a country in which he wasn’t allowed to vote. He was wounded twice during his years of service, which included work as a dispatch runner. Because of Longboat’s fame as a long-distance champion, in France he was used to run messages across dangerous and bullet-laced terrain into trenches where communications with other Canadian brigades had broken down. This was notoriously dangerous work that on one occasion mistakenly resulted in Longboat being declared dead. This was not the case and upon his return from the war, he would find a job working in the street-cleaning department of the City of Toronto. Although not glamorous work, Longboat never regretted his

position as a garbage collector. These were tough years for any man to find work, and his job was stable enough to allow him to provide a middle-class life for his family over the next twenty years.

Still, some newspapers of the time jumped on the fact that Longboat ended up with the street-department as implicit evidence of First Nations inferiority, almost as if they believed he finally got what was coming to him. "A rubbish man!" they wrote happily, "a particularly nice rubbish man... an Indian [sic] rubbish man." "He worked his way to the bottom," added Fergus Cronin in a nasty 1957 MacLean's article — defining Longboat's reputation as a sub-human failure that would last for twenty years.

In the late 1970s, Canadian Olympic athlete and sports historian Bruce Kidd, who is almost singularly responsible for rehabilitating Longboat's image by exposing the racist treatment he received at the hands of the Canadian media, began a campaign to urge the Toronto City Council to grant the heirs of Tom Longboat the $500 that had been promised to Longboat after his victory in the Boston Marathon. Despite all the pomp and circumstance of the time, none of the money had ever actually been paid. In 1980, the City of Toronto presented the Longboat family with a cheque for $10,000 (the original $500, plus interest). The story of Tom Longboat had, finally, begun to change. In 1998, *MacLean's* Magazine, in no small part due to Kidd's efforts to rehabilitate the runner's image, named Tom Longboat the most significant Canadian star of ALL TIME, ahead of Wayne Gretzky, Marshall McLuhan, and Celine Dion. Longboat would receive more recognition through admission to the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame and the Indian Hall of Fame (a recurring feature at the Canadian National Exhibition).

The accomplishments of Steve Collins, an Ojibway ski jumper from

Thunder Bay Ontario, while less well known than Longboat's (because of the relative obscurity of ski jumping in Canada), are, in some ways, as impressive. In 1980, Collins burst onto the international ski jumping scene by winning the World Junior 70m jumping championship. Later that same year, competing against jumpers with far more experience, and national programs with much larger resources, Collins won a World Cup meet and an International Ski Flying Championship. At the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid, Collins finished 11th in the 90m jump. He subsequently placed in the top 20 at several World Cup events and, after disappointing results in the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo, Collins won the 1985 national 90m ski jumping title at the Export 'A' Canadian Championships in front of a home crowd in Thunder Bay.

It is at this point in his career that Collins began to face difficulties. Collins' battle with alcohol addiction is referred to obliquely in the Footprints film and is well documented in the mainstream press coverage of the time. However, at the same time Collins confronted an issue that only received mention from Aboriginal news sources. In the aftermath of the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics, the national ski jumping team organizers decided to move Collins' and his teammates' training base from their Thunder Bay homes to a training facility in Ottawa. Refusal to cooperate meant quitting the team.

Collins decided to quit, and sat out the season because, in his words, he "couldn't leave my family and mortgage payments behind." After his year off in which Collins trained hard — and completed an alcohol treatment program in Minnesota — the organizers refused to sponsor Collins' bid to regain a spot on the National Team. Once again, as in the case of Tom Longboat, it was Bruce Kidd who became an advocate for Collins. With Kidd's financial support and lobbying power behind him Collins rejoined the national ski-jumping team in 1985. His subsequent results vindicated

both the support Kidd offered and the changes Collins made in his life. In the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, Collins finished 13th in the 90m jump and 9th in the team jump, Canada's best ever showing in these events. Though he retired after the 1988 Olympics, Collins came back for a short while in 1990, placing first in the 120m jump and third in the 94m event at the Canadian Ski Jumping and Nordic Combined Championships.

While Jordin Tootoo recently received widespread adulation in the infancy of his NHL career with the Nashville Predators, the stories of two of his predecessors in Canadian sport, Tom Longboat and Steve Collins, suggest that the treatment of Aboriginal athletes by mainstream Canadian media is often complex and contradictory. That First Nations athletes like Longboat and Collins succeeded to the extent that they did is a testament both to their world-class athletic talent and, equally, their unwavering resolve in the face of challenges particular to their position in Canada’s historical relationship with its Aboriginal peoples.

Activities

1. Other First Nations Athletes

The Footprints series includes two Aboriginal athlete profiles. It is probably true that many of us do not know of the Aboriginal heritage of many Canadian athletes, in part because the contributions of First Nations athletes have often gone unrecognized in Canadian sports history.

Develop biographical and professional profiles of some Aboriginal athletes, paying particular attention to each athlete’s relationship to his or her heritage. Not all people view their cultural background in the same

way. To some it is very important, but to others it is not nearly as significant.

This exercise is meant to give students an appreciation of the many nationally recognized Aboriginal athletes and also contribute to a nuanced understanding of the importance of culture in individuals' lives.

Possible athletes to profile include Adam Rita, Ted Nolan, Owen Nolan, Bryan Trottier, Waneek Horn Miller, George Armstrong, Alwyn Morris, and Darren Zack.

2. First Nations Running

Running was a significant aspect of early Indigenous civilization. In Onondaga tradition, running is said to bring myths to life, to create a link between runners and the universe. When Cortez touched shore in 1519, within twenty-four hours a chain of runners had provided descriptions of his ships, men, and weapons to Montezuma, five hundred kilometres away. Runners of messages in the Iroquois Confederacy (to which the Onondaga belong) carried news from the Atlantic seaboard to the Niagara frontier, running day and night, and navigating by stars.

Divide the class into groups, and have each research the history of running in North American history and tradition, as well as other famous runners who have emerged from this tradition. Research areas could include:

- Running in the Past
- Spiritual Traditions
- Running Today

Particular topics can be chosen from within these three subject headings.

3. Media Image, History and Rehabilitation

Tom Longboat's image in the eyes of history has changed significantly since the early twentieth century, as has our perspective on First Nations people as a whole. Although it is not explored directly in the background information, it is also the case that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal media told two different stories about Steve Collins' mid-career difficulties with alcohol.

Lead a class discussion. Why would Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal media focus on different aspects of Collins' story? To what extent does the perspective, history, and culture of the person telling the story affect the conclusions that they draw?

In small groups, ask students to research and give oral presentations on either major events that affected First Peoples in the history of Canada; or, important First Nations figures.

Presentations should focus on the different perceptions of the event/figure, depending on the perspective of the teller. This difference could be defined by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal identity. It could also be historical — charting the changing of perspectives from a single source over time. It is also interesting to explore dissenting views, which will always provide an alternative to the majority perspective, no matter what the historical era.

Major areas of research could include:

- The Residential School system
- The Oka Crisis of 1990
- Louis Riel
- Sitting Bull
- Aboriginal Title
- Land Claims
- The Reservation System (Reserves)
- The *Doctrine of Terra Nullius*, which stated the idea that lands uninhabited by European style nation-states did not belong to anyone. The seventeenth-century doctrine allowed European colonial powers to take control of land unclaimed by any European power, but inhabited by Aboriginal peoples.
- Imported disease
- Slavery -- especially along the east coast in the late 1500's and the 1600's.
- Relocations
- Bounties for extermination (the Beothuk and the Lenape or Delaware People).
- Cultural repression to force assimilation, especially through colonial or federal legislation (such as the Indian Act).
- Treaties

4. Media and Stereotypes

It is interesting to consider what impact the media has on history. As is the case today, the media have long shaped public opinion and been influenced by mainstream assumptions, especially in regards to Aboriginal people. Individually or in groups, have students pick a famous athlete that they admire. Each student is to write two 300-500 word articles in which the writer expresses his or her opinion about the athlete in question.

One of the columns should emphasize the athlete's successes. The second column should focus on the athlete's failures.

Success and failure can be defined broadly—in both personal and professional terms. Both columns should be supported by examples and argued with conviction.

In a classroom group, discuss the relationship between history and opinion. To what extent is it possible to argue successfully for opposing points of view? Is history objective? Why or why not? What determines how people and events get remembered?

5. Authority and Autonomous Decision Making

Both Longboat and Collins made decisions that went counter to the orders given to them by people in positions of authority over them. Individually, have students brainstorm situations in which they chose not to follow instructions from an authority figure and the consequences, good and/or bad, of those decisions.

On the blackboard make a chart that documents those changes and their consequences. Lead a discussion that assesses the pros and cons of those decisions.

Resources

Footprint Videos

Tom Longboat

The Canadian Encyclopedia

Tom Longboat

Steve Collins

Alwyn Morris

Batten, Jack. The Man who ran faster than everyone: the story of Tom Longboat. Montreal: Tundra Books, 2002.

Granatstein, J. L. "Tom Longboat (Cover Story), Maclean's Magazine, 07/01/98, Vol. 111 Issue 26, p49

Harding, Mark. "Collins's best jump was onto wagon; Battle with booze behind Canadian jumper
as he gears for first Cup meet" The Gazette, Dec 3, 1985, p. G7

Kidd, Bruce. Tom Longboat. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1992

McCallum, Mark. "The Highs and Lows of an Olympian Jumper" Windspeaker Magazine, Oct. 2, 1987. p. 18

McCallum, Mark. "Collins Back on Ski Team", Windspeaker Magazine, Dec 25, 1987 p. 18

Staff, "Collins still king of the hill; Jumper wins gold despite long layoff", The Gazette
Jan 22, 1990, p D3

Unwin, Peter. "Who do you think I am? A story of Tom Longboat." The Beaver Magazine, v81 (2), Ap/May '01 pp. 20 - 26