The History of Leisure and Recreation

Our National Heritage

The study of our history is essential to understanding the current state of recreation and leisure services. Our scholars and practitioners need an appreciation of the base from which we have proceeded so that we can appreciate why we have taken the directions that we have.

Susan Markham-Starr, 2005

Learning Objectives

- To examine early developments of leisure and recreation in Canada
- To trace the evolution of the public, commercial, and voluntary sectors for leisure and recreation in Canada
- To examine the effects of social trends on leisure and recreation
- To explore the evolution of leisure and recreation activities and pursuits in Canada
- To look at the effects that government has had on the development of leisure and recreation

Key Concepts

- National Council of Women
- Playground movement
- Golden age of sport
- ParticipACTION
- Lakonde Report
- The Elora Prescription

Leisure and Recreation Prior to the Dominion of Canada

Historical research indicates that leisure and recreation in Canada began prior to Confederation. In fact, the first accounts of leisure and recreation and physical activities can be traced back to the Inuit and the Aboriginal peoples of southern Canada.

Traditionally, all aspects of life were integrated for the Inuit and Aboriginal peoples. The activities and experiences of work, play, leisure, recreation, and religion were all interconnected. Physical fitness was an essential part of survival, and value was placed on the relationship between mind, body, and spirit (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

The Inuit and the Aboriginal peoples of southern Canada may have hunted and fished not only for survival, but also for pleasure. According to Searle and Brayley (2000: 15), "the Inuit and the Aboriginal peoples "played games, sang songs, played musical instruments, danced, and told stories for entertainment and amusement." Delorme (2000) notes that the primary concern for the Inuit was survival, and states that they "hunted the caribou seal and walrus herds and caught fish in order to feed and clothe themselves and make tools. Once the day's work was done, men, women and children would get together in igloos. Sometimes, they played games—simple ones, based mainly on hunting and fishing skills." (17).

In contrast—and despite the hazards of living in the Arctic—Ibrahim (1991) points that the lifestyle of the Inuit was characterized by playfulness, noting that the Inuit participated in a number of culturally significant games. Agraoruk was a game in which the contestants kicked a sealskin dangling from a pole. Nalukatook consisted of bouncing on a walrus hide held by others, similar to today's trampoline. Pirnautaq was an activity that consisted of flipping a whip in an accurate fashion.

A popular team game played by the Algonquins and Iroquois was baggataway (Searle and Brayley, 2000). The Mohawks called this game tewaarathon (Call, 1993). Today, baggataway or tewaarathon is referred to as lacrosse, a name given to the game by the French settlers of Canada who perceived a resemblance between the curved, netted stick and the crozier, a hooked staff carried by a bishop (Ibrahim, 1991).

Graeme Decarie, a history professor at Concordia University, claims that "lacrosse was invented by native peoples unknown centuries ago" (2000, 2B). For the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, lacrosse had multiple uses: "(1) settling major conflicts as an alternative to armed conflict, (2) bestowing power on individuals or groups of people, (3) offering thanks to the Creator for allowing an elder or medicine person to remain with the people to continue sharing their richness of life with the youth, (4) developing maturity and respect among