

IN DEPTH

How hockey offered salvation at Indian residential schools

Highlighting history of Canada's national game at residential schools step towards reconciliation

Duncan McCue · CBC News · Posted: Mar 26, 2014 11:15 AM ET | Last Updated: March 26, 2014

Duncan McCue explores how hockey provided an outlet for many Aboriginals in the country's residential school system. 12:12

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indian residential schools has travelled the country for five years now, collecting first-hand evidence of the trauma experienced and the legacy left behind.

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Willie Littlechild, who attended Ermineskin Indian Residential School for 14 years, says he owes his survival to hockey. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission)

But TRC Commissioner Willie Littlechild says the commission is also hearing positive stories — about Canada's national game.

"Hockey was the one bright light of a positive experience for many students," says Littlechild.

Sports, in particular hockey, was part of the curriculum at residential schools across Canada.

Students built rinks themselves or skated on lakes. Priests and lay teachers coached the boys, and they often practised daily.

Residential school teams took road trips to play other schools, and teams of non-Aboriginal boys too.

St Joseph's Jr Hockey Team 1936-37. Alec Antoine (far left), shown here with St. Joseph's Mission

Residential School team, lead the Alkali Lake Braves to the BC Northern League title in 1931. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission)

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"I owe my survival to hockey," says Littlechild, who attended Ermineskin Indian Residential School for 14 years.

He was abused physically and sexually there, but went on to play varsity hockey at the University of Alberta, where he studied law.

"If I didn't graduate, what was the alternative? I could have been found dead on the street in Edmonton on skid row, because of alcohol. So, it's really that strong for me, the influence of hockey in my life."

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- Willie Littlechild, residential school survivor

Littlechild believes highlighting the history of hockey at residential schools is one more step on a path toward reconciliation.

"I'm looking at the hockey community to join us again. We had this rich history together, through residential schools. Let's lift it up, and say, 'What can we do together to make it better, for youth who are in the communities now who don't have a chance to participate?'"

The TRC's national event in Edmonton runs through the weekend. On March 30, the Edmonton Oilers plan to honour residential school survivors, before their game against the New York Rangers.

Special thanks to Anglican Church of Canada Archives, Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for assistance with archival photos.

CBC's Duncan McCue has a [special documentary tonight on The National](#), about the importance of hockey as it was played in residential schools. Click on the video icon at

the top of this page to watch it.



A photo of the Ermineskin Indian Residential School team, circa 1945. (Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre)

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