

## Commentary

**Conceptualizing sport for reconciliation within settler colonial states****Shawn D. Forde<sup>1</sup>, Audrey R. Giles<sup>2</sup>, Jessica Nachman<sup>3</sup>, Tom Fabian<sup>2</sup>, Alexandra Giancarlo<sup>4</sup>, Lyndsay M. Hayhurst<sup>3</sup>, Steven Rynne<sup>5</sup>, & Daniel A. Henhawk<sup>6</sup>**<sup>1</sup> University of British Columbia, Canada<sup>2</sup> University of Ottawa, Canada<sup>3</sup> York University, Canada<sup>4</sup> University of Calgary, Canada<sup>5</sup> The University of Queensland, Australia<sup>6</sup> University of Manitoba, Canada*Corresponding author email: shawn.forde@ubc.ca***CONCEPTUALIZING SPORT FOR RECONCILIATION WITHIN SETTLER COLONIAL STATES**

Globally, research relating to sport for reconciliation purposes has largely been framed as part of “sport for development” (SFD) or “sport for development and peace” (SDP). For example, through their research in South Africa, Höglund and Sundberg (2008) highlighted how reconciliation through sport can take place at the national level, largely through symbolic efforts, at the community level through promoting interpersonal relationships, or at the individual level by trying to shift values and beliefs. International research relating to using sport for the purposes of reconciliation has largely focused on the latter two by examining community-based programs or events to bring groups of people together. Within research on sport and reconciliation, the notion of reconciliation is often undefined, or narrowly conceptualized as bringing people together (Schulenkorf, 2010). A potential reason for narrow understandings of reconciliation is that the bulk of research relating to sport and reconciliation is primarily rooted in theories developed from peace studies that focus on conflict resolution and peace building in contexts where conflict is ongoing or recently ended (Lederach, 2005). Reconciliation is therefore primarily understood not as an ongoing process but rather as something to achieve within broader attempts at peace building in post-conflict settings.

The focus on post-conflict settings and the lack of understanding of reconciliation as an ongoing process in previous research result in tensions when trying to apply notions of reconciliation to SFD/SDP with Indigenous peoples in settler colonial states. Based on our review of the critical scholarship on SFD/SDP, settler colonialism, and reconciliation, we are proposing an understanding of sport for reconciliation (SFR) that accounts for settler colonialism and foregrounds Indigenous self-determination. As explained in The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2008), “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (p. 8). Importantly, foregrounding self-determination within understandings of SFR acknowledges the ambivalent relationship that Indigenous peoples have with processes of state-led reconciliation. We believe that this conceptualization of SFR allows for critical engagements with how sport has been and continues to be understood and mobilized within Indigenous communities for truth-telling, relationship building, cultural resurgence, and expressions of sovereignty.

**Broadening Conceptions of Sport for Development and Peace to include Reconciliation**

The idea that sport can contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and that

development is a central part of reconciliation requires critical scrutiny. For example, discourses of reconciliation within settler colonial societies often focus on the need to “close the gaps” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in terms of development outcomes relating to health, education, and income levels. Addressing the health, education, and poverty levels of Indigenous communities is important; however, framing reconciliation in this way serves to position settler colonial understandings of development as the status quo and potentially promotes Indigenous assimilation by foreclosing Indigenous understandings of development and the future. Tuck and Yang (2012) discussed similar processes in terms of outlining how settler “moves to innocence” act as a way to “reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p. 3). Within SFD/SDP more broadly, discussions of peace and reconciliation are often subsumed by discussions of development. For example, the SFD/SDP sector has historically been connected to the work of the United Nations, primarily through linking sport to broad development objectives such as first the Millennium Development Goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; Morgan et al., 2021). And yet, within these presumably “global definitions” of development, Indigenous conceptualizations of peace, inclusion, and sustainable development within settler colonial societies are rarely considered. Broader literature on peace and reconciliation has similarly obfuscated critical Indigenous perspectives. As Edmonds (2016) explained, research and literature relating to reconciliation, transitional justice, and truth commissions “until recently has tended to ignore the specific conditions of settler states, where reconciliation has been used to address, stabilize and sometimes nullify the demands of Indigenous peoples” (p. 14).

This oversight is indicative of how broader considerations of sport, development, and reconciliation are necessary within SFD/SDP. For example, would scholars and practitioners interested in SFD/SDP come to different understandings of development and reconciliation if they were to engage with the UN’s (2008) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples instead of or in addition to the SDGs? Within the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, understandings of development and peace are inextricably linked to the historic and ongoing effects of colonialism and are underpinned by Indigenous self-determination. As noted in the Declaration, “control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs” (p. 4). Importantly, self-determination, like development, is not a universal concept.

Indigenous nations describe and enact self-determination in different ways, but often around similar concerns relating to sovereignty over their lands, cultures, and political systems. The form of SFR we are putting forward frames development, reconciliation, and peace within understandings of Indigenous self-determination. This is vastly different from dominant neoliberal understandings of development and SFD/SDP that marginalize Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and promote narrow understandings of reconciliation (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Hayhurst & Giles, 2013). Attempting development activities, including those related to SDP, within Indigenous communities without critical considerations of sport, reconciliation, and self-determination results in a failure to adequately address the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism.

### Settler Colonialism and Reconciliation

Settler colonialism has been described as a system of colonialism that is geared towards “replacing” Indigenous populations (Wolfe, 2006). This replacement can take various forms such as elimination, segregation, or exclusion, but all forms of it aim to disrupt or destroy Indigenous bodies, forms of governance, and the relations between people and between Indigenous peoples and their land.

Engaging with notions of reconciliation requires an analysis that accounts for this context. In settler colonial societies such as Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, processes of reconciliation have occurred largely as a result of public, political, and legal pressure from Indigenous peoples (Edmonds, 2016). Through state-led processes in Canada and Australia, the concept of reconciliation has been explicitly defined. Within Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (2015) report, reconciliation is described as,

*Establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour. (p. 6)*

Reconciliation Australia, which was formed in 2001, offers the following: “At its heart, reconciliation is about strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians” (Reconciliation Australia, 2021, para 1). Although the concept of reconciliation is less explicit in Aotearoa/New Zealand, since the 1970s, and as a result of Māori activism relating to upholding the principles

of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand governments have emphasized the concept of biculturalism and the principles of partnership, participation, and protection that are enshrined in the Treaty. Despite increasing rhetoric in settler colonial settings that emphasizes reconciliation and relationship building, there are ongoing tensions relating to how reconciliation is understood and operationalized.

These tensions are largely related to specific understandings of truth and justice, as well as notions of inclusion, sovereignty, land, and self-determination. Numerous Indigenous and settler scholars have noted how state-led processes of reconciliation within settler colonialism have served to maintain the status quo (Coulthard, 2014; Short, 2005; Simpson, 2017; Sullivan, 2016). Further, it has been noted that processes of reconciliation can perpetuate settler colonial aims by encouraging forms of assimilation (Grande & Anderson, 2017). As Simpson (2017) and Grande and Anderson (2017) have argued, reconciliation processes have promoted the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and the celebration of certain aspects of Indigenous cultures in ways that align with understandings of liberal multiculturalism. That is, forms of Indigenous culture are accepted and celebrated as long as Indigenous politics relating to self-determination and sovereignty are eschewed and the status quo remains unchallenged.

In critiquing settler colonial approaches to reconciliation, Cornthassel and Holder (2008) explained that state designed reconciliation processes are deficient and that “genuine movement towards recognizing Indigenous human rights and self-determination requires action by governments that systematically examines the past, initiates a process of homeland restitution, and holds institutions, as well as individuals accountable” (p. 487). Subsequently, the SFR that we advocate for moves beyond simply using sport as a way to recognize Indigenous cultures or as a space for professional sport clubs or settler governments to engage in symbolic acts of recognition and apology. SFR needs to be explicitly oriented against the settler colonial status quo in which Indigenous peoples are not afforded their right to self-determination. In some ways, this commentary, and the form of SFR we are advocating for, overlaps with recent work that has called for approaches to sport that focus on Indigenous cultural resurgence and decolonization (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Essa et al, 2021). However, we remain concerned with how forms of cultural resurgence may be appropriated within state-led reconciliation processes. As Henhawk (2018) explained, “the survival of our communities and resurgence of our cultures depends upon our ability to recognize and reconcile the dilemmas of compromise and contradictions that define our existence” (p. 1).

## Critically Engaging with Reconciliation in Sport

Professional sport organizations in settler colonial societies have recently engaged in activities that they have framed as facilitating reconciliation. For example, the Canadian national broadcast Hockey Night in Canada recently promoted “Orange Shirt Day,” recognizing the impacts of the Indian Residential School system (Douglas, 2020). Ron MacLean, a prominent Canadian sports broadcaster, explained that promoting Orange Shirt Day represented “a true acknowledgement of what took place and chance to fix it. It’s just a really, really important aspect of making Canada whole again” (Douglas, 2020, para 11). In Australia, the proliferation of “Indigenous rounds” across a variety of sporting contexts often involve a celebration of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous peoples’ contribution to sport. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori practices such as the haka have been adopted within amateur, professional, and national levels of sport. A more critical consideration of SFR raises important questions relating to the role of mainstream or Euro-centric sport within reconciliation processes and how these activities may promote a form of reconciliation that essentially requires Indigenous peoples to assimilate into settler colonial societies.

SDP interventions relying on Euro-centric understandings of sport have promoted the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into neoliberal understandings of land, development, and citizenship (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Henhawk & Norman, 2019; Sheppard et al., 2021). This can be viewed as continuing the assimilative drive of settler colonialism. For example, historically, in Canada the Department of Indian Affairs employed sports and recreation in residential schools and reserve communities in the service of social and economic “progress” (Forsyth, 2020). As Henhawk and Norman (2019) argued, these processes of assimilation are exacerbated by the increasing modernization of sport, “in which Indigenous people can access the boons of modern capitalism by exploiting, taming and overcoming the natural world and, in so doing, overcoming the limits of their traditional cultures” through sport (p. 169). The mobilization of sport for the purposes of assimilation is based on a deficit discourse that delegitimizes Indigenous traditional games and land-based physical activities (Paraschak & Heine, 2019), as well as their cultural and spiritual connotations, in the fanfare and performance principle inherent to mainstream sport.

Symbolic acts at sporting events, and the recognition of Indigenous cultures, can be an important part of reconciliation processes. These acts highlight how particular aspects of Indigenous cultures are now seemingly respected, promoted, and celebrated through sport.

However, as forms of reconciliation, these efforts may also be what Tuck and Yang (2012) have described as settler “moves to innocence” through which discussions of Indigenous self-determination and land rights are obfuscated by forms of settler colonial tolerance and inclusion. Further, the recognition of Indigenous cultures and nationhood can function to reaffirm the authority of governing bodies over Indigenous sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014). Therefore, we need to question how these symbolic sporting acts could further the assimilative aims of settler colonialism. Simpson (2017) explained that through acknowledging and celebrating some forms of cultural resurgence, settler-colonial societies deflect from activities and movements for political resurgence that threaten colonial structures.

If, as noted above, current sport-based efforts towards reconciliation within settler colonial societies are simply promoting the assimilation of Indigenous peoples but are not significantly changing the underlying colonial structures that subordinate Indigenous politics and sovereignty to the state, then we need to ask how other forms of SFR could offer potential alternatives.

### **Moving Beyond SFD/SDP: Sport, Reconciliation, and Self-Determination**

SFD/SDP programming, although intended to work towards developmental goals, have regularly been found to perpetuate harms for Indigenous peoples (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Henhawk & Norman, 2019). As noted above, reconciliation through SDP programming has primarily been understood as something to achieve within broader attempts at peace building and not as contributing to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. The form of SFR we are promoting, however, aims for respectful, responsible, relevant, reciprocal, and relationship-oriented sporting initiatives that attend to past injustices as well as the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism. Further, sport in this sense should not simply be viewed as an activity that can bring people together, as a venue for apologies or commemoration, or as a tool to “develop” Indigenous peoples. Instead, any approach to SFR needs to critically engage with understandings of both sport and reconciliation that move to challenge the settler colonial status quo. Fundamentally, the process of reconciliation within settler colonial societies can only really begin once historical truths are recognized and Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are upheld. In this sense, the form of SFR we are advocating for would include instances of Indigenous peoples using sport or other physical cultural practices for the promotion of resistance, sovereignty, and self-determination. In various settler colonial contexts, Indigenous historians have highlighted the complicated

processes of assimilation and resistance for Indigenous peoples within sport (Bamblett, 2011; Judd & Osmond, 2022; Hokowhitu, 2003; O’Bonsawin, 2019). For example, recent work by Downey (2018) explained how the reclamation of lacrosse and the creation of the Iroquois Nationals lacrosse team was part of ongoing efforts to maintain Indigenous sovereignty. Indeed, in her work on Mohawk sovereignty, Simpson (2014) highlighted the Iroquois Nationals team’s refusal of state-issued passports when the United Kingdom did not recognize their Iroquois Confederacy-issued passports while the team was travelling to a tournament. More recently, the team called for a boycott of the 2022 World Lacrosse Games after they were excluded from participating despite their competitive ranking; this action received international support (Chidley-Hill, 2020). Forsyth (2020) also showed how Indigenous peoples in Canada were able to use political and sporting organizations, such as the National Indian Brotherhood (now referred to as the Assembly of First Nations) and the Aboriginal Sport Circle, to develop and express forms of Indigenous self-determination through sport (Forsyth, 2020).

These historical examples align with how Henhawk (2018) described reconciliation as “much more than how we utilize cultural activities to create a better human experience but deeply dependent upon the stories we choose to perpetuate that leads to self-determination, to sovereignty and emancipation” (p. 163). Because of racist and colonial histories of sport in settler states, using sport for the purposes of reconciliation and self-determination is a messy and paradoxical process. However, in line with the conceptualization of SFR for which we are advocating, Henhawk (2018) goes on to argue that a critical understanding of the tensions between Euro-centric and Indigenous understandings of and approaches to sport, leisure, and physical activity are essential to “enact a praxis that brings Indigenous notions of sovereignty and self-determination into reality” (pp. 149-150). In this sense, our conception of SFR would also challenge notions of “sport” and would include traditional Indigenous games and other physical and cultural practices such as dance, and even the act of walking. For example, in response to the finding of unmarked graves at the sites of numerous residential schools in Canada, Indigenous people and communities organized “healing walks”. These walks ranged from individuals engaging in long distance walks or runs, to Indigenous communities organizing walks within communities, to larger walks involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Engaging with these walks as a form of SFR recognizes how Indigenous communities are “committed to developing their own, preferred approach towards enhancing their lives through physical activity” (Paraschak & Thompson, 2014, p. 1055). A more comprehensive and nuanced understanding



of SFR provides a basis upon which to engage in the praxis that Henhawk has advocated. It also provides a reference point for researchers and practitioners to examine, critique and support reconciliation efforts in sport.

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