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Indigenous Hockey Success and the Medicine Wheel

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Abstract

Background: Indigenous athletes often employ wholistic frameworks into their training practices and lifestyle choices to enhance their performative success. This narrative review analyzes the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional experiences that contribute to the successes of three elite Indigenous hockey athletes: Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty. **Purpose:** We aim to investigate how the teachings of the Medicine Wheel have shaped their accomplishments and continue to foster success in Indigenous youth athletes within future generations. **Methods:** A strengths-based qualitative approach was used to collect data from peer-reviewed literature, YouTube videos, and interviews regarding the selected athletes. Data was analyzed using a Two-Eyed Seeing approach to provide a broad perspective on the factors that contributed to the success from Indigenous and Western viewpoints. **Results:** Our findings were derived from three main interviews: Ethan Bear's interview with Scott Oak on Sportsnet's "After Hours," Jordin Tootoo's interview "Inuk NHL player Jordin Tootoo on life after going "All the Way" with CBC Radio, and Jon Mirasty's interview with Michael LaRocque on "The Warrior's Path" podcast. The wholistic approach of the Medicine Wheel was found to contribute significantly to each of their achievements. Factors that could be passed from their journey to Indigenous youth athletes were also identified. **Conclusions:** The journeys of Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty underscore the influence of spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional elements on the future success of Indigenous athletes, serving as an inspiration for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

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Introduction

Indigenous athletes often embody a wholistic approach to empower their success, which demands a balance between physical, mental, emotional and spiritual domains of well-being, community cohesion, and connection to the land (Johnson et al., 2020). While scholars have traditionally employed the term "holistic" in sports literature, "wholistic" has increasingly been used to foreground the

inseparable unity between these dimensions of well-being (Miles et al., 2023). This approach focuses on the concept of "whole," asserting that true well-being is only attained when physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components are honoured as inseparable unities that cannot be prioritized at the expense of the other (Johnson et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2023). Although current literature has begun recognizing the

salience of adopting multidimensional training strategies for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth athletes, including spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional practices, these wholistic experiences continue to be insufficiently examined in mainstream sports literature, specifically in the context of hockey. Hockey literature predominantly focuses on the discussion of physiological characteristics and training protocols as a primary indicator of performative success (Johnson et al., 2020). To address this gap and explore these elements within hockey, the successes of hockey players (e.g., personal success, awards, and achievement) can be examined using the wholistic frameworks of the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1). The Medicine Wheel is a sacred Indigenous teaching that represents health as a wholistic construct encompassing spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental dimensions of well-being (Mashford-Pringle & Shawanda, 2023).

Figure 1. Medicine Wheel.



Note: The visual representation of the Medicine Wheel was created by the authors for illustrative purposes. The Medicine Wheel views wholistic balance as attainable when an individual fulfills their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

The purpose of this narrative review is to indicate how hockey players share

comparable experiences and use a comprehensive Medicine Wheel (spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical) approach toward accomplishing their goals in both traditional and Western hockey contexts. (Sportsnet, 2022; Schultz et al., 2018). This narrative review examines the interviews of Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty, three accomplished Indigenous hockey players whose stories embody resilience, strength, and the importance of embracing cultural identity when navigating mainstream sporting environments. Given the significant lack of existing literature on the experiences of Indigenous female-identifying hockey players, this review focuses on male athletes, a field consisting of a well-established research foundation, thus allowing for deeper critical analysis.

Methods

This narrative review employs a strengths-based qualitative methodology, emphasizing the resilience, capabilities, and growth of athletes and their communities, rather than focusing on deficits or challenges. Evidence was gathered from peer-reviewed articles, interviews, and YouTube videos of three male-identifying Indigenous hockey players. Our findings were primarily derived from three main interviews: Ethan Bear's interview with Scott Oak on Sportsnet's "After Hours," Jordin Tootoo's interview "Inuk NHL player Jordin Tootoo on life after going "All the Way" with CBC Radio, and Jon Mirasty's interview with Michael LaRocque on "The Warrior's Path" podcast. A Two-Eyed Seeing approach was employed, a guiding principle introduced by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall that promotes intercultural collaboration by drawing on the strengths of multiple knowledge systems (Lavallée & Lévesque,

2013). In particular, this approach promotes the idea of viewing the world with Indigenous ways of knowing in “one eye” and Westernized knowledge systems with “the other eye” (Lavallée & Levesque 2013). To analyze the lived experiences of the three athletes, we employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes within the athletes’ narratives. The analysis adopted an inductive and interpretive approach, grounded in participant narratives and guided by the core principles of the Medicine Wheel. After analyzing the interviews of Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty, the Two-Eyed Seeing principle was employed to value their cultural insights and lived experiences while gathering analytical information from mainstream sports literature.

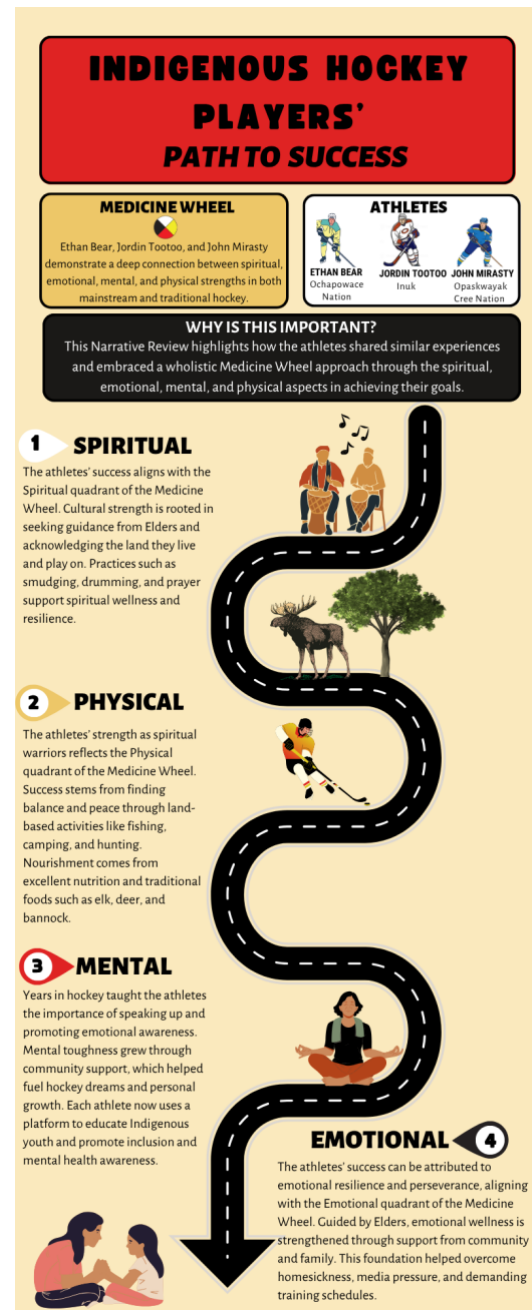
Results

Spiritual Wellness

Firstly, we identified recurring themes in the examined athletes’ spiritual wellness (see Figure 2). Ethan Bear looked up to Indigenous players such as Carey Price and Jordin Tootoo growing up (Sportsnet, 2022). He actively seeks to honour his Indigenous heritage, exemplified by having his name in Cree written on the back of his jersey during an NHL game, wearing it for “[all] Indigenous players who came before [him] and [all] Indigenous kids dreaming of playing in the NHL” (O’Leary, 2020, para. 2). He also regularly participates in drumming and prayer, both traditional practices that contribute to one’s spiritual wellness (Holstein, 2023). Similarly, being the first Inuk player in the NHL, Jordin Tootoo’s achievements in hockey are closely associated with his cultural heritage (Bergman, 2019). He perceives hockey as a tool to uplift the spirit of First Nations communities and believes his

success comes from being spiritually in harmony with nature (Bergman, 2019).

Figure 2. Infographic.



Note: This figure illustrates that all quadrants of the Medicine Wheel are interconnected in the stories of Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty. It provides concrete examples from the interviews to represent their lived experiences and personal journey to athletic success.

Tootoo actively seeks knowledge from Elders and acknowledges the land, viewing it as a source of well-being, strengthening “people’s sense of identity and important relationships, empowering people, providing access to traditional foods and physical activity, limiting access to alcohol, and strengthening and promoting collaboration of community organization” (Schultz et al., 2018, p. 6). Jon Mirasty from Flying Dust First Nation, like Tootoo, credits his land as a primary contributor to his spiritual wellness even away from Flying Dust (LaRocque, 2023). Mirasty practices spiritual wellness both on and off the land by giving thanks to the Creator and the land after hunts and continues these practices while away through prayers and smudging (LaRocque, 2023).

Mental Wellness

Consistent trends in the mental wellness of the three athletes were observed (see Figure 2). Bear participates in lifelong learning from the lived experiences of his community and Elders despite being at the highest level in his profession (McConnell, 2022). He demonstrates mental resilience by approaching conversations with willingness to educate others based on his unique experiences, even in the face of discrimination (UNINTERRUPTED, 2022). Tootoo faced many external and internal pressures in his career, such as the psychological challenges of media scrutiny and being away from his community at home (Blouin, 2020). His hockey career taught him to ask for support from his community and Elders, inspiring him to serve as a mental health advocate for at-risk Indigenous youth, raising awareness for anti-bullying and suicide prevention. (Bergen, 2020; Blouin, 2020). Regarding Mirasty, his community and family pushed

him mentally by providing motivation and support through his feelings of doubt and isolation after moving away from Flying Dust (LaRocque, 2023). Mirasty also found mental strength in the inspiration of Indigenous youth athletes for whom he was setting an example for, pushing him to work hard to achieve his goals and exhibit resiliency as a positive role model (Johnson et al., 2020, LaRocque, 2023). Like Bear, he continues lifelong learning through collaboration with Elders in his position as councillor of Flying Dust (LaRocque, 2023).

Emotional Wellness

Emotional wellness was also a common theme exhibited through the exploration of the athletes (see Figure 2). Bear leans on his parents for strength, expressing, “when I feel alone, I know I’m lucky to have my family and support from my parents” (Sportsnet, 2022, 13:44). Growing up, Tootoo lived in a household where he expressed bottling up his emotions and did not have the chance to communicate frequently; thus, in his hockey years, he learned the importance of speaking up and promoting emotional awareness (First Nations Health Authority, 2019). Tootoo emphasizes that vulnerability is not correlated to weakness, and all feelings are valid (The Canadian Press, 2020). He inspires his community to “seek help, lean on others, renew and redefine purpose, pursue joy, and put life into greater perspective,” suggesting that communities should be there for one another and celebrate each other’s successes as their own (Blouin, 2020, para. 29). Mirasty similarly relied on his community for emotional strength. As aforementioned, his family and community were the biggest factors in supporting him through difficult and adverse times. His father, for example, would bike beside him as he ran and would

speak words of encouragement and positive affirmations (Hein, 2023).

Physical Wellness

Lastly, shared patterns of physical wellness were found in the investigated athletes (see Figure 2). Bear approaches this from a nutritional perspective, incorporating traditional foods such as elk, deer, and Bannock, explaining that nourishing his body with these foods feels like a daily form of healing (Nugent-Bowman, 2021). He also incorporates traditional land-based activities into his training and recreational time when at Ochapowace Nation (Canadian Hockey League, 2013). Tootoo's culture taught him to continue to fight like a spiritual warrior, where he credits "the physical toughness he learned on the land as the source of his strength to persevere in hockey and life" (Bergman, 2019, para. 4). His successes are also correlated to his ability to find fulfillment through land-based activities such as fishing and hunting (Bergman, 2019). Mirasty's focus on physical wellness revolves around a Two-Eyed Seeing approach (LaRocque, 2023). Regarding Indigenous ways of knowing, Tootoo highly values land-based activities, attributing his strength in hockey as a derivative of hard-working labour hours on ranches, and spending his recreational time setting snares or nets, riding horses, or cow-chasing (LaRocque, 2023). Regarding Western ways of knowing, as a professional athlete he saw the advancements and evolution of modern training for elite hockey players away from Flying Dust (LaRocque, 2023). He now aims to teach Indigenous youth hockey athletes a balance of both perspectives as he practices to best supplement their goals (LaRocque, 2023).

Discussion

The success of the three explored Indigenous athletes was found to be deeply embedded in the principles of the Medicine Wheel. While sports literature heavily prioritizes physical metrics as a key indicator to athletic achievement, Ethan Bear, Jordin Tootoo, and Jon Mirasty collectively conceptualize success as a multifaceted construct that can only be attained when spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical practices are balanced. Their resilience is not simply an intrapersonal trait but rather described as a culturally mediated process sustained through spiritual ceremonies, emotional vulnerability, reciprocal relationships with Elders, and land-based activities, all feeding into their ability to persist in high-performance hockey environments (see Figure 2). In the athletes' success stories, the Medicine Wheel does not solely play the role of a symbolic framework, but rather as a guiding force that allows them to cope with stress, inspire their communities, and find purpose in their roles as an athlete and citizen.

The interpretation of these results can be uniquely defined into two central themes: 1) the personal characteristics that were most prominently valued in the success stories of the investigated athletes, and 2) the perceived influence of their role model status on Indigenous youth. The Medicine Wheel has been shown to help preserve sacred traditions and culture in Indigenous athletes, specifically as they move forward in the world of sport (Johnson et. al, 2020). Elite youth Indigenous athletes often move away from their communities to urban cities to pursue their journeys as elite athletes (Carpenter, 2022). Johnson and colleagues (2020) found that strong cultural support networks, emotional and mental resilience,

having a progression-based mindset, and preserving cultural connections are common themes in facilitating success within sports for youth Indigenous elite athletes in their new environments.

In addition, one of the largest sources of inspiration for Indigenous youth to look up to is the success of Indigenous athletes, who can serve as their role model when navigating cultural dissonance and systemic barriers in mainstream sport (Halsall & Forneris, 2016). A commonality amongst the three athletes is that they all experienced both inspiration from Indigenous athletes before them, but also a drive to inspire and provide opportunities for the next generation of Indigenous youth (Halsall & Forneris, 2016). Given the structural barriers that the athletes described overcoming, including a lack of access to training facilities, racism in hockey, and deficit-framed surveillance of Indigenous bodies in sport, their influence as cultural leaders and advocates extends beyond the arena and helps reclaim efforts towards community healing, decolonization, and the reclamation of Indigenous presence in sport. The involvement of a wholistic approach has a downstream effect in this regard, where greater integration of wholistic principles from Indigenous athlete role models results in greater sports participation in Indigenous youth because of increased cultural representation within the sporting environment (Bruner et al., 2015; Halsall & Forneris, 2016). This, in turn, leads to more equitable opportunities for Indigenous hockey athletes to succeed in competitive hockey environments (Bruner et al., 2015).

Conclusions

Through the analysis of Jordin Tootoo, Ethan Bear, and Jon Mirasty, we identified the significant impact of spiritual, mental,

physical, and emotional factors on the future success of Indigenous athletes. Despite Tootoo, Bear, and Mirasty playing on non-traditional hockey teams, their success arose from embracing their cultural identity on and off the ice, inspiring a plethora of Indigenous youth in their community to be proud of their cultural roots, acknowledging the land they are located on, and accepting knowledge from their Elders. To overcome the pressures of hockey, a physically and mentally demanding sport, they showed the significance of engaging in traditional land-based activities, such as fishing, drumming, smudging, and hunting, to attain wholistic balance in mainstream sporting environments (Bergman, 2019; Holstein, 2023; LaRocque, 2023; Warburton, 2022). In addition, the athletes highlighted to their community the importance of continuously supporting each other and treating each other's achievements as their own; all factors that led to their success. Today, Jordin Tootoo, Ethan Bear, and Jon Mirasty serve as a source of motivation and inspiration not only for Indigenous youth generations but also for the non-Indigenous population. When critically engaging with the stories of these Indigenous athletes, non-Indigenous athletes can understand the complexities of Indigenous histories, challenging forms of preconceived biases and colonialism in mainstream sporting environments. We must continue to make efforts to celebrate the remarkable journey of these athletes, whose strength, resilience, and fearlessness led to success in mainstream hockey environments. Given the considerable lack of Indigenous female representation in sports literature, we recommend future research to be guided by Indigenous women in hockey and focus on amplifying their lived experiences to

foster a more culturally grounded and equitable understanding of gender in the sport. This is of significant relevance to ensure a more equitable understanding of gender representation in mainstream hockey.

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Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Carmen Golnaraghi BKin, MA; Kevin Weng BKin, MSc; Kane Louie BKin, MKin; Nilou Rostami BKin; Rosalin M. Miles BA, MHK, Ed.D.

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