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INDIGENOUS WOMEN AT THE OLYMPICS [W.I.N. Sports, Inc.]

Introduction:

"Even when you're tired, you have to keep going." The words of one of our Indigenous Olympians which perhaps captures much of the status of Indigenous Women's participation at the Olympic Games. Consider that there are approximately three hundred and fifty million (350 million) Indigenous Peoples on mother earth. To overcome all kinds of odds: many of those, all women, have to endure, is truly a phenomenal accomplishment. To follow are some great Indigenous Women because they kept going even when they were tired. Tired of added barriers like cultural differences, poverty, racism, stereotyping... among others. To rise above all these and more is in itself a gold medal performance. A performance that means so much for all Indigenous Peoples spiritually and culturally.

Background Information:

In recent times, there has been increasing numbers of Indigenous girls and women who now compete at the elite levels of sport. Prior to the development of Indigenous Games which are modeled after the Modern Olympics with the original concept of Olympism, there were simply no Indigenous Women participating. There are many reasons for this, however, the primary reason was that opportunities did not exist. Now with the North American Indigenous Games, for example, gender equity is regulated in the Constitution and Bylaws. The experience gained in the Indigenous Games has led to increased involvement and success at numerous National Championships, for example, in North America.

W.I.N. Sport has participated within the United Nations and other international forums, supporting through interventions, the fact that Sports are Human Rights.

We have taken a lead role in advocating on behalf of Indigenous Peoples in Sport within the International community and have continued to ensure that when important gatherings such as this Third Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues are held, Indigenous athletes are represented.

Who were the Indigenous Women who kept going?

Perhaps at the outset, it must be stated that those identified are based on current information. There may be more Indigenous Women who have competed but that required more detailed study and should be conducted for further report. For many years many Indigenous athletes would hide their racial identity so that they could be permitted to participate. For many because of stereotyping, they would not be given the same opportunities. Yet, when given the chance; Indigenous Women have succeeded beyond all expectations.

1. THE FIRTH TWINS - Sharon and Shirley [Cross Country Skiing]

The trail blazers: Sharon and Shirley Firth. As you know, to compete in one Olympic Games is the goal and dream of many people, if not all athletes. To make four, in spite of all the odds, is outstanding. The Mackenzie Delta Loucheux twins, who were born at Aklavik in the Northwest Territories, each made four Olympic Teams for Canada. They were there in Cross Country Skiing

in:

- 1972 Sapporo , Japan
- 1976 Innsbruck, Austria
- 1980 Lake Placid, United States of America
- 1984 Sarajevo, Yugoslavia

While they did not medal, it is acknowledged that the first of anything is always the toughest. So for Indigenous Peoples all over the world, Sharon and Shirley Firth won more than a medal, they won a belief and recaptured pride for a Peoples. Besides, to compete in four Olympics is a fact that not many Olympians in the world have accomplished. Combined with several World Cup Events, Sharon and Shirley won more than thirty Canadian National Championships between them. For their success and leadership, Sharon and Shirley Firth were honoured with induction as members of the Order of Canada , the highest civilian award in Canada.

2. ANGELA CHALMERS: [Track and Field]

In the Summer Olympics of Barcelona in 1992, another Indigenous Woman of the Bird Tail Sioux Nation qualified for the 1500 metres and 3000 metres. Her Aboriginal name is Running Fast Woman, a name given to her by her grandmother as a young girl. Having placed fourteenth in the 3000 metre and seventeenth in the 1500 metre for Canada at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Angela Chalmers won a bronze medal at Barcelona in 1992 after winning two gold medals at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. For the Indigenous Peoples in Canada, this was the First Olympic medal won by an Indigenous Woman. A third Olympics was cut short when she had to withdraw due to injuries, nevertheless, an Olympic medalist.

3. CHERI BECERRA: [Track and Field Paralympian]

While gifted athletes have to work so hard to reach incredible heights, there are those who are able to transcend beyond abled athletes, such is the case for Cheri Beccera of the Omaha Tribe who won a bronze medal in the 800 metre wheelchair event at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Staying on for the Paralympic Games that followed, she won silver in both the 100 and 200 metres and bronze in the 400 and 800 metres. She is also the current world record holder in the 400 metres with a 54.62 time. Her Omaha name is Umba Tha Gle which means Return of a New Day. She also competed in the Australia Paralympics.

4. NOVA PERISO-KNEEBONE: [Field Hockey]

As you know, Nova Periso Kneebone, an Aboriginal Olympian for the last host country, Australia, was the first Indigenous Woman to win a gold medal at the Olympics. As members of Australia's Olympic Team in field hockey, they won gold at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. She has also designed an Olympic coin which depicts the Aboriginal Culture as her continued involvement in promoting sport and culture.

5. CATHY FREEMAN: [Track and Field]

Cathy Freeman became a public figure when she won the 1994 gold medal in the 400 metres at the Commonwealth Games. The Aboriginal Woman chose to take her victory lap with two flags draped around her body: the Australian flag and the Aboriginal flag. The two time defending World Champion in the 400 metres joined Cheri Beccera on the Olympic podium when she won the gold medal. She has said, "I am at the Olympic Games to run the fastest 400 metres in my life."

6. WANEK HORN MILLER: [Water Polo]

Born in Kahnawake, Quebec, Waneek is a member of the Mohawk Nation. She hit the water for Canada at Sydney as one of the two Indigenous Women who competed at the North American Indigenous Games. She was very successful with several gold medals in swimming at the North American Indigenous Games as well as her team's gold medal win at the 1999 Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada. As you know, water polo made its debut at the Australian Olympics 100 years after the men. She was chosen assistant captain for Canada's team, another tremendous achievement.

7. ROBIN LYONS: [Track and Field]

Another fantastic athlete who became prominent at the North American Indigenous Games is hammer thrower, Robin Lyons. A Cree Metis from Alberta, Canada. While her initial strength was in discus and shot put; her gold medals at the Indigenous Games ensured her a Track Scholarship in the United States of America. Recently, she switched to hammer throw, an event which she quickly learned with hard work. Robin is a Canadian women's hammer throwing champion and national record holder. On a sad note, however, she dropped from the Olympic Team for testing positive for anabolic steroids. She denied any such use and appealed her case to an arbitrator. We are behind her one hundred percent as she is simply not one to take performance enhancing drugs.

8. OTHER INDIGENOUS WOMEN:

While the previously mentioned athletes have been at the Olympic Games, you will be watching more in future Games. Becki Wells in the 1500 metres has been an athlete with great potential and sponsored by the Native American Sports Council. The N.A.S.C. is a member organization of the United States Olympic Committee. Another Indigenous Games athlete with her career sadly ended by an automobile accident is dual sport competitor, Teddi Littlechild of the Ermineskin Cree Nation. Having competed at the Canada Games in Kayak-Canoe, she also participated in six Canadian Championships events. While returning from a Canada/U.S.A. dual meet, she was seriously injured, ending her Olympic dreams.

Indigenous Hall of Fame inductee, June Gladstone - Willms of the Kainai Blood Tribe, Blackfoot Nation, competed on the Canadian National Volleyball Team for ten years. As Captain of the Women's Volleyball Team, she was a role model for many.

As you know, Evonne Goolagong was another true warrior and trail blazer in the sport of tennis which she dominated for many years.

There are probably many more athletes, for example, we have not mentioned any of those who have competed in other events like the Paralympics and Special Olympics. Nevertheless, we are very proud of them all because we know of the incredible hurdles they had to overcome.

ADVOCACY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES:

W.I.N. Sports, Incorporated was formed by a Resolution in 1977 which was presented in Kiruna, Sweden to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples with the recommendation to create the World Indigenous Nations Games. Under the able leadership of Emily Lank, Cara Currie-Hall, Clive Linklater, Raymond Arcand and Gene Keluche, we have formed this international organization to ensure that the world's Indigenous Peoples are given equal opportunity in sport at all levels and within the Olympic Games.

Under the leadership of our Vice-President, Mrs. Cara Currie-Hall, we have seen several sports organizations for Indigenous Peoples and Women in Sport, become established and operational both in Canada and internationally. She has established several sports clubs and training institutions for coaches and athletes throughout North America. She has also participated by invitation in the Canadian Olympic Association Academies and worked for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games in 1996 in the International Olympic Youth Camp.

During the last few years, she has been instrumental within the international sport community and the *International Olympic Family* for advocating successfully, to have Indigenous Women as part of the programmes of the World Conference for Women and Sport and also, for the 2000 Pre-Olympic Scientific Congress. An athlete herself, retired also due to injury, she continues to serve a critical role of leadership to ensure that we will see more and more Indigenous Women in the Olympic Games, and perhaps to also represent their own Indigenous Nations.

CONCLUSION:

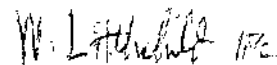
Because of the interest, this project stimulated it is worth the effort to research all the Indigenous Nations globally to identify the Indigenous Women participating at the elite levels. There are, for example, many in non Olympic sports that are worthy in every way to be highlighted as they too have succeeded. There is no doubt there are others from all the Indigenous Territories and Nations like the Maori, the Inuit, the Americas ...

Finally, W.I.N. Sports, Incorporated, would respectfully make two recommendations and request this important Third Session of the U.N. Permanent Forum to support:

1. There must be increased recognition and resources at all levels of the sports industry to assist Indigenous girls and women to enable them to participate and compete with equal opportunities.

2. The Indigenous Women, past and present at the Olympics, must be given ongoing support from the International Olympic family to ensure their transition is one worthy of their contributions and efforts.

The Board of Directors of the World Indigenous Nations [W.I.N.] Games acknowledge and pay our highest tribute to all Indigenous girls and women who participate in the celebration of life through sports and culture. To those highlighted for their Olympism; their value to our Peoples is one that cannot be sufficiently described - they teach us all to be WINNERS IN LIFE. Thanks to them and thanks to you for your interest and support.



Mr. Wilton Littlechild, I.P.C.
U.N.P.F. 3 Member