

Success Strategies of Elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Athletes

Maria Johanne Jacko

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts (M.A.) in Human Kinetics

School of Human Kinetics
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Ottawa

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Terry Orlick for his guidance and his expertise. He provided me with great insight and I was honoured to have him as my supervisor. From day one, Dr. Orlick was an inspiration for this study, and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to work with him.

I give my sincere gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Diane Culver and Dr. Tanya Forneris, who provided me with great advice and feedback. I feel my research was greatly enhanced with their direction.

Moreover, I would like to thank the eight elite athletes for taking the time to participate in this study, and for being very open and honest in sharing their experiences. I was truly inspired by each of their unique stories, and I loved hearing their journeys to excellence.

I would like to extend my appreciation to Theresa Buckshot, Philippe Boucher, James Galipeau, Brittany Glynn, Penny Jacko, and Douglas Odjick, who supported and helped me with my research.

Finally, I thank my daughters Jennifer, Drew, and Sienna, who were patient with me while doing my research.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain an in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. Limited research has been conducted on elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and a narrative analysis was used to analyze the research findings. The specific objectives of this study were to better understand the success strategies used by each athlete; to explore the obstacles each athlete faced on their way to the top of their sport; and to elicit the advice they would give to young First Nations, Inuit, or Métis athletes who want to attain a similar high level goal in sport. The main success strategies shared that reportedly helped these high performance Aboriginal athletes excel in their sport included: focus, mental preparation for competition, parental support, passion, and positive self-talk. Multiple obstacles were faced by the athletes in this study, with racism and leaving home being common challenges. The advice that these athletes provided for young and aspiring First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes was rich and inspiring. For example, elite female boxer Mary Spencer shared that some lessons can only be learned through experience. The practical findings of this study provide useful information for aspiring Aboriginal athletes and open the door for future meaningful applied research, that may lead to reducing the gaps in the literature.

Success Strategies of Elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Athletes

There are very few First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes in Canada who perform at an elite level (for example, at the Olympic or Professional level). Many obstacles, including historical and current situational factors, make it very difficult for a First Nation, Inuit, or Métis person to become an elite athlete (Schinke et al., 2007). What is it that drives, influences, or frees First Nations youth who do become high performance athletes? Did they grow up in remote communities, on reserves, or were they raised in urban settings? How did they overcome the enormous obstacles that First Nations people face daily? Did they feel they had a lot of support from people around them when they first got involved in their sport? If yes, where did this support, or belief in themselves, or belief in their potential come from (family, friends, school, other people on their reserve or in their community, teachers, coaches, or other athletes they competed against)? How were they able to make it to the elite level or live their dream – when so many First Nations people view it as an impossible goal?

The primary purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. Elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes were asked to share their personal journeys to excellence, from their own perspectives, to help us better understand what they feel influenced them, drove them, motivated them or helped them succeed at these high levels. They were also asked what they felt hindered their progress, or created obstacles for them on their journey to the top, and how they managed to overcome those obstacles to reach their goals or live their dreams.

This study also had a larger aim, which was to inspire First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth to participate in sport and compete in sport at the highest levels. There are many potential benefits for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people participating in sport, including overall

confidence enhancement, and overcoming many of the health problems associated with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people: These health problems include obesity, alcohol and/or drug abuse and an absence of regular physical activity (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2007).

According to the 2006 Aboriginal¹ Peoples Survey, Aboriginal peoples are comprised of three different minority groups (of people) in Canada; First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Aboriginal peoples make up 3.8% of the Canadian population with 1,172,790 people. Moreover, the 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey report that there are 732, 520 First Nations people, 50, 485 Inuit people, and 389,785 Métis people living in Canada. The 2002-2003 First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey reported that common health problems among First Nations people across Canada include: heart disease, diabetes, alcoholism, high rates of smoking, lack of exercise, obesity, suicide, and ill health in general. The 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey report that the most common health problems of Inuit included high rates of smoking, tuberculosis, arthritis, and high blood pressure. Furthermore, the most common health problems found among the Métis were arthritis, high blood pressure, asthma, and diabetes. Each of these health problems have the potential to be reduced through increased involvement in sports and physical (Cox, 2013).

As a First Nations person, when I think of elite First Nations athletes, the Olympics immediately come to mind. Looking back in history, Jim Thorpe, from the Sac and Fox nation in Oklahoma, USA, was the first recognized Native American² to participate in the Olympics. He won two gold medals, one in pentathlon, and another in decathlon, in the 1912 Olympics (Buford, 2010). Billy Mills from the Oglala Lakota Tribe in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, USA, is another recognized Native American who participated in the Olympics and performed at a very

¹In this study, First Nation, Inuit, and Métis will be used interchangeably with the term Aboriginal.

² Native American is an American term. It is equivalent to the term 'First Nation'.

high level. He won a gold medal in the 10,000 meter race during the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. In Canada, one of the first highly recognized First Nations individual to win a gold medal in the Olympics was Alwyn Morris, a Mohawk from Kahnawake, Quebec. He won two medals in the 1984 summer Olympics, a gold medal in the K-2 1000 meter, and a bronze in the K-2 500 meter flat water kayaking events (Orlick & Partington, 1986). These are some of the first people who come to mind when I think of First Nations people in the Olympics. In addition to learning more details about the journeys of exceptional First Nations people/athletes like the ones mentioned above, I also hope that this study will contribute to more First Nations people becoming inspired to participate in sport and pursue their dreams.

Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. The specific objectives were,

- a) to better understand how each athlete attained his/her high level of success;
- b) to explore what obstacles each athlete faced on their way to the top of their sport and how they managed or overcame those obstacles; and,
- c) to explore what advice they would give to young First Nation, Inuit, or Métis athletes who want to attain similar high level goals in sport.

Significance of the Study

This exploratory study is extremely important because research related to sport and elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes is virtually non-existent. This study will begin to fill an important gap in the literature. This study will also help First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people better understand what strategies and motivators are needed to attain high levels of success in sport. The findings of this study have the potential to not only help First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people interested in sport, but also have the capacity to help all people interested in gaining success in general. Moreover, the athlete stories in this study may be of value in helping physical educators, coaches and teachers who teach, coach, or instruct First Nation, Inuit, and/or Métis youth. These success stories may be helpful in teaching Aboriginal youth relevant success strategies to excel in sport, school, physical activity, and life.

Review of Literature

An extensive search of the literature revealed that there are very limited studies related to elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes. The following review of literature begins with a brief history of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. A general overview of sport psychology and mental skills along with common success strategies used by elite athletes is then presented. A summary of potential performance problems among elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes is also included, followed by an overview of the stories of Jim Thorpe, an amazing Native America Olympic gold medalist, and a highly respected Indigenous Australian Olympic gold medallist Olympian, Cathy Freeman.

History of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis People

Many texts/scholars use the Bering Strait theory to explain the origins of First Nations people in North America. Anthropologists believe that First Nations people came from Asia by foot through the Bering Strait about 14,000 years ago when the sea level was lowered (after the rise of the Ice Age) and a land bridge emerged known as Beringia (Crowe, 1991; Dickason, 2006). It is believed they migrated to Canada and the United States in search of better hunting grounds. A variety of First Nations cultures were identified throughout time. About 500 years ago, many different First Nations tribes occupying Canada were grouped into two groups according to location, language, and dialect - Algonkian and Athapaskan (also known as Dene). Algonkian tribes lived in eastern Canada and Dene tribes lived in Western Canada while the Inuit occupied the north (Crowe, 1991; McMillan & Yellowhorn, 2004). According to Dickason (2002), the government of Canada designed the Indian Act in 1867 to define an “Indian” and to define the land designated to them (by the white people who came from Europe to occupy

Canada). They referred to these designated lands (for First Nations people) as reserves. The Indian Act has been amended over twenty times. As a result, today, there are over 600 different First Nation bands across Canada (Dickason, 2002).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, First Nations people were believed to be here 14,000 years ago. According to archaeologists, 2,000 years later, Inuit people came into existence (Bonesteel, 2006). It is not known though, if Inuit people came from previous First Nations people occupying Canada. About 1000 years ago, Inuit peoples occupied lands in the western and eastern Arctic and migrated east to northern Quebec and Labrador (Bonesteel, 2006).

The preceding paragraphs describe the origins of First Nations and Inuit people, however, many First Nations and Inuit people have different beliefs about their history, that is, they believe that they occupied their land since time immemorial. Many First Nations communities depend on oral traditions and cultures handed down from the Elders in their community and rely on the oral stories told by the Elders to describe their history (Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008). For example, in my community of Kitigan Zibi located near Maniwaki, Quebec, a book was written in 2004 to describe the way of life of our community and utilized Elders in Kitigan Zibi to depict our story (McGregor, 2004). This book is entitled “*Since Time Immemorial: Our Story, The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg.*” As explained in this book, this was the third attempt to unravel our history, and it is believed that it was finally done successfully.

The Métis people surfaced around the mid 1600’s and were referred to as half-breeds. A Métis person is defined as someone who is of mixed culture, that is, of First Nation and White ancestry (Redbird, 1980). The word Métis comes from the French which means “simply

mixed”. Métis people identified themselves as a group in the 1670’s and originated in the prairies of Manitoba. Louis Riel publicly used the term ‘Métis’ in 1869 when fighting for their land in Red River in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Redbird, 1980). In 1870, the Government of Canada acquired the Red River Settlement and at the time, promised title lots to the Métis people. These promises were never kept (Sprague, 1988). It was only in 1982, that the Métis people became officially recognized as one of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada by the Canadian Parliament (Sprague, 1988).

Sport and Sport Psychology

Sport is thought of as being mainly physical, and athletes participating in sport must utilize his/her bodily resources (Brewer, 2009). Some physical attributes that are important in sport performance include speed, stamina, fitness, strength, flexibility, and agility. However, an athlete's state of mind also plays an important part in sport performance and sport psychologists have focused on understanding the psychological factors that are related to sport and physical performance (Anshel, 2012; Brewer, 2009). Cox (2013) defines sport psychology as "the study of the effect of psychological and emotional factors on sport and exercise performance, and the effect of sport and exercise involvement on psychological and emotional factors" (p. 5). Anshel (2012) states that applied sport psychology often focuses on helping athletes achieve and maintain optimal levels of performance. Moreover, elite athletes strive for optimal performance, while applied researchers and applied sport psychology consultants strive to help athletes apply essential mental skills that allow them to perform their best.

Success Strategies of Elite Athletes

Vanden Auweele (as cited in Anshel, 2012) defined elite athletes as those “who are eligible for competition at the national, international or Olympic level, or who are professional sportspersons” (p. 26). This definition will be utilized for this study.

Orlick (1998, 2008) has found that a relationship exists between an athlete’s performance level and their acquired mental skills. In an extensive interview study conducted 25 years ago, Orlick and Partington (1988) identified key mental skills of elite athletes drawing upon the experiences of 235 Canadian Olympic athletes from the 1984 Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo and the 1984 Summer Olympics Games in Los Angeles. The most common mental skills and performance enhancement perspectives exemplified by these elite athletes were:

- total commitment to pursuing excellence;
- daily goal setting;
- imagery training;
- engaging in competition simulation;
- pre-competition plans;
- competition focus plans (focusing fully in the moment);
- distraction control; and,
- competition evaluation (Orlick & Partington, 1988).

Many athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study displayed extreme commitment toward their sport. Their entire life revolved around excelling by training and competing in their sport. More recent work by Anshel (2012) has also identified that it is the commitment to achieve at a high level that is a personal athlete characteristic of high level performers.

Research has shown that goal setting is an effective way to create consistency in training programs for athletes and allows athletes to become more productive (Cox, 2012; Porter & Foster, 1986). Moreover, the benefits of goal setting accumulate over time, because success with first goals can often lead to more certainty for future goals. Therefore it has been found that it is best to set short term, intermediate, and long-term goals for sport and training goals (Gauron, 1984; Porter & Forster, 1986). In Orlick and Partington's (1988) study, the best athletes set and wrote down specific daily goals with respect to what they wanted to achieve. For example, an athlete would write what s/he what wanted to accomplish each day, each individual workout, and within each set, part, run, or routine, in a workout.

Imagery, also referred to as visualization or mental imagery, involves knowing what you want and using your all of your senses to create the picture(s) in your mind repeatedly, ensuring that the pictures are as vivid and real as possible. Research shows that the brain does not know the difference between an actual real event and a vivid re-created event (Cox, 2012). Imagery is used by athletes to perfect and rehearse skills and strategies and to gain confidence on competition day (Anshel, 2013; Gould, Flett & Bean, 2009). Similar to goal setting, imagery training was also found to be a common mental skill among Olympic athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study. They found that the athletes used imagery to perfect their skills, to correct their techniques, and to imagine themselves achieving their goal and winning.

Simulation training is another common preparation technique used by elite athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study. It is used by athletes to practice concentrating their focus by simulating experiences similar to competition. The athletes approached their practices as if they were in their respective competition (Gould, Flett, & Bean, 2009). As the athlete is imagining it, it feels real and does not come with failures that can happen in the actual

competition (Orlick, 2008). In some cases, for example, the athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study, even wore the actual clothes they planned to wear in competition and did everything they believed they would do on the day of the competition, and some imagined crowds of people cheering them on and congratulating them after their win.

Mental preparation for competition is also a key factor of athletic success and it has been shown that athletes who spend more time to mentally prepare are more successful than their counterparts (Gould, Flett & Bean, 2009). A component of mental preparation is the development of pre-competition plans and many of the elite athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study utilized pre-competition plans. The athletes mentally planned and prepared prior to competition by putting together detailed pre-competition plans, which included the use of imagery, setting up a routine, having a good warm-up, and having positive reminders and positive thoughts, to ensure they focused on what would help them perform their best and achieve their goals.

Focusing fully on the task was another common element of success that was shared by elite athletes in Orlick and Partington's (1988) study. The athletes prepared focus plans for their competition to ensure they stayed on track and stayed extremely focused on their own performance/strategy during competition, which brought out their strengths. Orlick (2008) believes that focusing fully in the moment in sport means that you become one with the performance, ensuring to focus on things that are critical to the performance while blocking everything else out.

An athlete's ability to concentrate on his/her performance and avoid distractions is another key component of athletic success (Benz, 2009; Burke, 2003, Moran, 2009). Athletes need to concentrate on what is in their control to have the best chance for success. More

specifically, athletes need to focus on how they prepare for the competition, how they compete during the competition, and how they react to distractions. If the athlete can be trained to narrow his/her mental focus to details of the competition, then the athlete has the best formula for performance success (Moran, 2009). Anshel (2012) states that successful athletes have the ability to focus during competition and also has the ability to refocus and recover when off track. In the Orlick and Partington (1988) study, the use of distraction control skills was found to vary, as only the best and most consistent athletes were skilled at controlling their focus, especially if setbacks occurred or something did not go as planned. Less experienced elite athletes in this study, who were not able to perform their best in big events, reported that they were not able to control their focus, and as a result, allowed setbacks or negative thoughts to distract them from their best focus. The best athletes were able to direct their focus and get back on track quickly even when things went wrong (Orlick & Partington, 1988).

Competition evaluation in sport performances can be done in many ways. Porter and Foster (1986) recommended that athletes keep a training log after each competition to evaluate their performance, as a training log contains a written account of the athletes feelings, thoughts, pictures, fears, and strengths, during each part of the competition. Moreover, the athlete should write down their feelings within 24 hours of the performance. In Orlick and Partington's (1988) study, the best athletes utilized ongoing evaluation. They evaluated every part of their performance in the competition, often with the help of diaries or logbooks, to discover what worked well and what went wrong, and then immediately worked on refining their focus and extracting lessons learned, to ensure a better or more consistent performance in the next competition.

Orlick (2008), who has worked with many elite athletes over a period of 40 years and written many books and applied research articles on excellence in sport and life, provided the following guidelines for athletes who want to excel in sport,

- set daily goals;
- prepare mentally before training to get the most out of your practice or workout;
- commit to training with the highest quality of focus and effort;
- simulate in training what you want to do in competition;
- commit to focusing 100% in training and be totally connected to the task at hand;
- use imagery to prepare yourself daily to achieve your goals and to perfect the execution of your skills;
- practice distraction control daily by focusing on high quality training and focusing on things within your control;
- remind yourself of the focus that works best for you before important competitions and stick to pre-game preparation plans and your on-site focus plan; and,
- always draw lessons out of every performance and act on them.

Study of elite Aboriginal athletes being coached in mainstream society

Schinke et al. (2007) conducted a study comprised of 23 competitive Aboriginal athletes from different areas in Canada. Their study focused on elite Aboriginal athletes being coached in mainstream culture. Schinke et al. (2007) defined elite Aboriginal athletes according to two conditions. First, all participants had to have experience at the national amateur level and had to be current or former athletes. Moreover, all athletes had to be Canadian Aboriginal (i.e., First Nation, Inuit, or Métis) athletes.

The researchers reported on barriers to the advancement of elite Aboriginal athletes in sport. These barriers included conflict, concerns or misunderstandings between mainstream coaches and Aboriginal athletes (which resulted from poor communication), lack of cultural knowledge, and insensitivity to Aboriginal culture. Further barriers included racism and cultural prejudice. Schinke et al. (2007) stated that research in different fields of study show that Aboriginal people view sport and health practices differently from mainstream society, as they are more community-based in their thinking, and they include cultural and spiritual components. For example, an athlete in Schinke et al.'s (2007) study said that he felt that coaches should focus on making athletes better people, not just focus on being a good athlete, as better people will help the community out more. Furthermore, many Aboriginal athletes in the study suggested that if cultural and spiritual components could be added to their training, then it could be used as a way to enhance their performance. For example, one participant felt that if a sweat lodge was allowed before a competition, it could be beneficial for his performance.

One recommendation emerging from the Schinke et al.(2007) study was that coaches take formal education or culturally specific courses so that they can: gain an understanding of the hardships and racism faced by Aboriginal athletes; increase their knowledge of Aboriginal culture; and learn techniques to teach Aboriginal athletes more effectively. For example, one participant felt that a coach could be more effective if he had knowledge of their culture, as many families had negative residual effects from being in residential schools. A second recommendation was that coaches utilize more resources and social support for the Aboriginal athletes. For example, working with the athlete's parents could be beneficial to the enhancement of their children's performance, as many parents showed support through discipline and encouragement (Schinke et al., 2007).

Elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes today have some of the same barriers that Aboriginal athletes had decades ago. For example Jim Thorpe, an elite Native American athlete who won gold in the 1912 summer Olympics, also experienced racism during his athletics.

Native American elite athlete Jim Thorpe

Jim Thorpe is one of the most notable Native American elite athletes. He was able to attain high levels of success in different sports and on many different levels. According to Buford (2010), on May 28th, 1888, Jim Thorpe along with his fraternal twin brother Charlie, were born in Prague, Oklahoma to Hiram Thorpe and Charlotte Vieux. Jim's father Hiram Thorpe was half Sac and Fox and half Irish. His mother Charlotte, was a mixture of three-quarters Pottawatomie and Kickapoo and one-quarter French. Hiram Thorpe was a big athletic man (six foot two inches tall and 230 pounds), who was a great wrestler as well as being an excellent hunter, trapper, tradesman, and blacksmith. Buford (2010) further states that Jim was a natural athlete like his dad and learned to swim at three years old. He loved the outdoors and learned to hunt at an early age. When Jim was young, many men from nearby communities would gather every weekend in front of the Thorpe family cabin to compete in games such as wrestling, running, horseback riding, high jumping, and long jumping (Cook, 2011). According to Jim, his dad Hiram always won each of the competitions, thereby instilling the competitiveness and hunger in him for winning. At age six, both Jim and his twin brother Charlie went away to school to the Sac and Fox reservation that was 23 miles away, and only went home on holidays and during the summer. The brothers were very close and Charlie thrived more in school and helped Jim to adjust. Jim thrived more in the outdoors and learned how to play baseball at his first school. When the twins were nine years old, Charlie died of

pneumonia, leaving Jim feeling alone and withdrawn. Jim ran away from the school several times and his father sent him and his older brother George to a more distant school, the Haskell Institute. This was an Indian boarding school in Lawrence, Pennsylvania, where he learned to play football. During his time at Haskell, his mother died of blood poisoning. Soon after, when Jim was 15 years old, he enrolled at the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Buford, 2010). Two months after enrolling, Jim's father passed away from blood poisoning. Jim's only home now was the Carlisle Indian School. It was here that he met and was coached by Glen Scobey 'Pop' Warner, a widely recognized football coach at the time. Jim started out with Coach Warner in track and field (Buford, 2010).

Jim went on to train for the track and field events (Buford, 2010). Jim trained as much as he could, showing a total commitment for excellence, as described by Orlick and Partington (1988), as a mental skill utilized by elite athletes. Thorpe trained in all different track and field events including the shot put, the 100 yard dash, 220 yard dash, hurdles, broad jump, hammer throw, and the high jump (Cook, 2011). Coach Warner challenged Jim that if he could perform the high jump at five feet ten and a half inches, then he would be able to compete in an upcoming competition (Buford, 2010). As identified by Orlick and Partington (1998), elite athletes set daily goals. Thorpe saw this as an achievable goal, practiced consistently, and showed Warner he could jump five feet eleven inches. Warner took him to the competition, called the Penn Relays, which took place in Philadelphia, in April of 1908. Thorpe earned his first major medal, as he called it, with a high jump of six feet one inch (Buford, 2010). Less than a month later, Jim went to another competition, with Carlisle against Syracuse in Elmira, New York, and won two medals for hurdles (120 yard and 220 yard); tied for first in the high jump, won second in shot put; and scored the highest score in track and field events, defeating

Syracuse (Buford, 2010). Thorpe started to gain confidence in sport, which Cox (2013) believes is a building block to motivation, as athletes are motivated to practice because they have confidence that they can succeed in sport. Thorpe's confidence spilled over into his academics as he received high marks in literature, history, civics, math, and grammar, among other subjects (Buford, 2010; Cook, 2011). In May of 1908, at a dual meet against Syracuse, Jim outshone and won first place in high and low hurdles, along with the shot put, and high and broad jumps. Thorpe defeated Bill Horr, who went on to win sixth in the 1908 Olympics, and become noticed nationally for the first time (Cook, 2011). Jim had a great 1908 track and field season and was Carlisle's track star but did not qualify for the 1908 Olympics in London (Buford, 2010). Jim went on to play baseball in the summer of 1908 and the summer of 1909 and he started to play football in 1908 as well.

Jim Thorpe started to focus on the upcoming 1912 Olympics, and began preparing for track and field, leaving baseball and football behind (Cook, 2011). Thorpe would analyze other elite athletes, and set up a series of moving shots in his head, with each moving shot consisting of a sporting task, and would visualize them over and over again (Buford, 2010). Orlick and Partington (1988) refer to this as imagery training, and found that it was a common mental practice for elite Olympic athletes. Other athletes would watch Thorpe mark out distances and then sit and stare at them (Buford, 2010). For example, Johnny Hayes, a silver medal Olympian, remarked that he had seen Thorpe chalking off 23 feet divided by two lines on a cement sidewalk, and was shocked as he thought Thorpe was going to practice his long jump on the cement! He was happy to see that he was wrong, as Thorpe went to lie down in a hammock, and eyed the two chalk marks intensely for a while, then turned around to sleep (Cook, 2011).

The 1912 Olympics added two events that were not in the previous Olympics: the pentathlon and the decathlon and these events would test track athletes all-around athletic ability. The pentathlon consisted of the broad jump, javelin, discus throw, 200 metre sprint, and 1500 metre run. The decathlon consisted of the 100 metre sprint, the broad jump, high jump, 110 metre hurdles, shot put, 400 metre sprint, pole vault, discus throw, javelin, and the 1500 metre run (Buford, 2010). To prepare for the pentathlon and the decathlon events, Coach Warner made a plan for Thorpe, and told him to enter five to seven events at every meet in the spring of 1912. Thorpe followed through on Warner's plan, excelled in the 1912 spring track meets, and qualified for the United States Olympic trials in the high jump, broad jump, pentathlon, and decathlon events (Buford, 2010).

In the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Jim Thorpe won two gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon events (Cook, 2011). He easily beat the favoured competitor with a 700 point difference. He was called the greatest athlete in the world by King Gustav V of Sweden, who even shook Jim's hand, and by Martin Sheridan, an American five time gold medallist (Buford, 2010).

Sadly, Thorpe was stripped of his medals in 1913 by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) in the United States due to playing professional baseball in the 1909-1910 season (Cook, 2011; Buford, 2010). Much controversy followed. Some believed that the AAU's decision was based on racism due to the remarks they made about Thorpe being an ignorant Indian with limited education and experience. Cook (2011) states that the AAU's ban appears absurd by today's standards and that ban is incomparable to any other. Thorpe admitted to playing for the minor league Rocky Mount team in North Carolina in 1909 in the summer while a student at the Carlisle Indian School. It was said that this was common practice as many other amateur athletes

did the same thing but did so using aliases (Cook, 2011). Many argued on Thorpe's behalf that the 1912 Olympic rulebook stated that objections had to be made within 30 days of the closing ceremonies to be valid, and objections against Thorpe were made more than six months later. These objections did not hold at the time (Buford, 2010). On May 6, 1913, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Thorpe's trophies and gold medals to the 1912 Olympic second place winners. Ferdinand Bie of Norway was awarded gold for pentathlon and Hugo Wieslander of Sweden was awarded gold for the decathlon. It was rumoured that these two at first refused the medals because they felt strongly that Jim Thorpe deserved them. Norwegian Hugo Wieslander even wrote a note to the IOC stating that he would not feel right accepting gold for the decathlon as he felt that Jim Thorpe was the greatest athlete in the world (Cook, 2011, p 78).

Cook (2011) states that in 1913, Thorpe signed with the New York Giants and officially became a professional major league baseball player. He played on and off as an outfielder for six seasons and also played for the Cincinnati Reds. In 1915, Jim was coaching football and then began playing for the Canton Bulldogs in Canton, Ohio. In 1920, Thorpe, among others, met to decide details of a national football organization, as no such organization existed. Thorpe was elected President of the Association because of his prominence in the game. During this meeting, the National Football League was formed as it is known today (Cook, 2011). Thorpe played in the NFL for various teams (Canton Bulldogs, Cleveland Indians, Oorang Indians, Rock Island Independents, New York Giants, and Chicago Cardinals) until 1928.

In 1950, Jim Thorpe was named the best football player in the NFL by almost 400 national sportswriters and radio broadcasters. On March 28th, 1954, Thorpe died of heart failure at the age of 64. In 1982, Jim Thorpe's medals were reinstated as the Jim Thorpe foundation

proved that the disqualification happened after the 30 day period, as stated in the 1912 Olympic rule book. Today, Jim Thorpe is still seen as the greatest athlete in the world by many (Buford, 2010; Cook, 2011; Verlag, 1998).

Cathy Freeman

As mentioned earlier, the Aboriginal people of Canada comprise of 3.8% of the total national population. Similar to the Aboriginal people of Canada, the Indigenous³ people of Australian represent a small portion of the national population, approximately 2% (Phillips, 2000). Also similar to Aboriginal people in Canada, Indigenous people of Australia have higher than the national average rates of addictions, diseases, suicide, and poverty (Phillips, 2000).

In Australia, there are very few successful elite Indigenous athletes, and this is the same case with Aboriginals in Canada. Cathy Freeman is one of Australia's most notable elite Indigenous athletes. Cathy started running when she was just eight years old, and had a love of running since (Freeman & Gullan, 2003). When she was 16 years old, she won gold at the Commonwealth Games with the 4x100 metre relay in 1990. She became the first Indigenous Australian woman to compete in the Olympics in Barcelona in 1992. In 1994, at the Commonwealth games in Canada, Cathy won gold in the 200 metre and 400 metre races. In 1996, she won silver in the 400 metre race at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. She also won gold in the 400 metre races at the 1997 and 1999 World Championships. Finally, Cathy Freeman is most recognized for winning the gold medal in the 400 metre race at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

³Both terms, "Aboriginal" and "Indigenous", are generally used interchangeably to represent the first peoples of Australia and Canada. For this paper, Aboriginal peoples will refer to Aboriginals in Canada only and Indigenous peoples will refer to Indigenous peoples in Australia only.

Prior to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Cathy Freeman became an activist for Indigenous peoples rights. For example, during the 1994 Commonwealth games, when she won gold in the 400 metre race, she celebrated her victory lap holding both the Indigenous and Australian flags (White, 2013). She received a great deal of media coverage and was reprimanded by an official of the Australian Commonwealth Games team, but the reprimand was disputed by the public and the Prime Minister of Australia at the time (White, 2003).

At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Cathy Freeman became a focal icon for Indigenous prominence within Australia, from the point that she was chosen to carry the Australian Olympic flag for the opening ceremonies (Phillips, 2000; White, 2013). Along with winning gold in the 400 metre race in track and field, Cathy also lit the Olympic cauldron (Phillips, 2000). Many argued that Cathy's pivotal moment could have been either of these two events, or a combination of both, that aided her in pioneering the lessening of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of Australia (Phillips, 2000; White, 2003). Cathy Freeman's race was the most watched sports event in Australia (White, 2013), and her gold medal win was viewed by Australian society as the start of the process of reconciliation for the Indigenous population, where Freeman was seen as the bridge between the repressed Indigenous peoples and the non-Indigenous population of Australia. (Phillips, 2000).

Comparing the Indigenous peoples of Australia to the Aboriginal people of Canada displays the similarities between the two groups of minorities. Moreover, the comparison demonstrates the importance of this research in that it is not limited to the Canadian Aboriginal population, as it will also be meaningful to other Indigenous populations.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. A qualitative approach was used which was interpretive and aimed to provide an insiders perspective (Gratton & Jones, 2010) of the phenomenon. More specifically, this study was exploratory, as very little knowledge is known about this phenomena (i.e., elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes) and it was also descriptive, as this study described their personal journeys to excellence, their challenges, and how they overcame them. Narrative analysis was utilized to analyse the data. The primary goal was to explore and describe their personal journeys to excellence. I have included a short personal autobiography below to put into context why I chose this topic, and how I was able to connect to the eight elite athletes in this study.

About Me

I am a very energetic full-time mother of three with a passion for running and promoting and living a healthy lifestyle.

- I was born in Syracuse, New York, my mother is Algonquin from the Kitigan Zibi, a reserve adjacent to Maniwaki, Quebec, and my father is of Ojibway and Irish descent, from the Syracuse area.
- I lost my mother when I was seven years old through tragedy, and lost my father to a heart attack when I was 17.
- I grew up with one sister and two brothers, and from my father's extended family, I also have three younger sisters, and an older brother and sister.
- I started pre-school in Kitigan Zibi, but moved to the Syracuse where I attended a few elementary schools. At the age of 13, I moved back to Kitigan Zibi, to be closer to my

brothers, and lived in foster care, first with my aunt for a year, then with another caring family, as I attended high school on the reserve. I graduated high school with awards in Math, Physics, and Economics.

- When I was 14, I lost my 18 year old brother to yet another tragedy in my life.
- I obtained my Honour's Bachelor degree in Social Sciences in 2001.
- I got married when I was 21 then gave birth to twins, two beautiful baby girls, when I was 24. I later divorced but have always maintained a close parental relationship.
- I worked on the reserve for a year as a researcher after my twins were born.
- I met the father of my next child, with whom I had a beautiful baby girl with, and I lost him through tragedy as well.
- I started my Master of Arts in Human Kinetics in the fall of 2003. After a year, I put my studies on hold to care for my newborn and my twins.
- In 2008, I took a Medical Laboratory Technician program and started a part-time job as a Medical Technician in 2009, which I am still doing today.
- Also in 2008, my niece who was 16, and her friend, also 16, went missing. This is an area in my life that I remain very active in; to search and find her and her friend. I run a website (www.findmaisvandshannon.com) to receive tips and information which may lead to their whereabouts. I am also very active and vocal with the media for awareness.
- I worked at the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada for two years starting in late 2008, as a project coordinator for a cultural competency framework and mentorship program. I did a lot of research and writing, which motivated me to finish my Masters.
- In 2009, I developed an exercise video with a 20 minute and a 40 minute workout. Much of the program in the video I use during my fitness classes that I teach at the Odawa

Friendship Centre in Ottawa, the Kitigan Zibi School, and the Kitigan Zibi Health Centre.

- In 2009, I ran my first marathon and have continued to run marathons yearly
- In 2010, I joined the Ontario Self Employment Benefit program to develop and promote my exercise business.
- In 2011, I started an annual run called the KZ Run for Maisy and Shannon, to raise awareness and donations for a reward, to find my missing niece and her friend. I will continue to do whatever it takes to ensure they are not forgotten and/or until they are found. The KZ run is also to promote health and fitness in the community.
- Along with taking care of my girls, who are now nine and 14 years old, I aim to inspire others through health and fitness, and I plan to continue my education, either by doing a PHD or by becoming a medical doctor.
- The reason why I chose this thesis topic is to inspire First Nation, Inuit and Métis youth. When I teach elementary First Nation students exercise classes in my community, I see how motivated and excited they are as we are having fun and exercising. I believe that being exposed to different sports and exercise classes will give them and other First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth more opportunities to focus on athletic goals and health at a young age.

Participants in the Study

A total of eight participants (five men and three women) were interviewed for this study. All participants are elite First Nation, Inuit or Métis athletes and are considered elite athletes by Vanden Auweele's definition (as cited in Anshel, 2012). Vanden Auweele defined elite athletes

as those “who are eligible for competition at the national, international or Olympic level, or who are professional sportspersons” (p. 26).

The participants were selected from a number of different sports. All the participants are of Aboriginal descent, ie, First Nation, Inuit, and/or Métis ancestry. All participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Table 1 provides some background details for each of the eight participants.

According to Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005), one of the most common selection methods used in qualitative research is purposive sampling, where participants are selected or grouped based on pre-selected criteria that are relevant to a specific research question. Furthermore, purposive sampling allows for rich data, specifically related to the purpose of the study, as the participants are recruited based on specific criteria and knowledge; knowledge that can provide an in-depth understanding to the specific topic of interest. Specific criteria for this study included being an elite athlete and being of First Nation, Inuit or Métis descent.

Table 1. Details of the eight elite athletes and their sport.

Athlete	Name	Sex	Age	Age of retirement	Hometown	Sport	Aboriginal affiliation
1	Mary Spencer	F	27	Still competing	Cape Crocker, Ontario	Boxing	Chippewas of Nawash
2	Dallas Soonias	M	29	Still competing	Red Pheasant, Saskatchewan	Volleyball	Cree and Ojibway
3	John Chabot	M	51	39	Summerside, Prince Edward Island	Hockey	Algonquin
4	Gino Odjick	M	43	33	KitiganZibi, Quebec	Hockey	Algonquin
5	Jordin Tootoo	M	30	Still playing	Rankin Inlet, Nunavut	Hockey	Inuit
6	Waneek Horn-Miller	F	38	25	Kahnawake, Quebec	Water Polo	Mohawk
7	Billy Mills	M	65	30	Pine Ridge, South Dakota	Track and Field	Oglala Lakota Sioux
8	Caroline Calve	F	34	Still competing	Alymer, Quebec	Snowboarding	Algonquin

Measures

Semi-structured interviews retain an element of flexibility, as pre-determined interview questions are used, but mainly as a guide, and the distribution of initial questions and follow-up questions are determined by the researcher (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Additional questions may be added during the interview process and not all questions on the pre-determined interview guide necessarily have to be asked. Furthermore, the data in this study was collected used open-ended questions, which, according to Mack et al. (2005), are the most commonly used questions in qualitative research.

Using a pre-determined, semi-structured interview guide, interviews were conducted with eight elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes. Interviews continue to be the main form of data collection within sport psychology journals (Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012). Mack et al. (2005) confirm that in-depth interview questions allow the researcher to collect data in an optimal way, by posing questions relevant to the research topic. The researcher asks relevant questions, listens attentively and follows up with more questions, and probes after specific responses to elicit more detailed and relevant responses from the participants. This frees them to share personal feelings, experiences, and perspectives related to the research topic (Mack et al., 2005). For this study, two of the eight interviews were conducted face-to-face. The other six interviews were conducted via telephone.

The interview guide that was utilized for this study (in Appendix A) originated from the extensive interview study done by Orlick and Partington where individual interviews were conducted with over 200 Canadian Olympic Athletes. This original interview guide was fine-tuned for the purposes of this study with elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes.

Interviews in qualitative research are normally tape recorded and transcriptions of the interview are typically typed verbatim (Mack et al., 2005, p. 321). These procedures were followed in this study because it helped the interviewer to gain and retain important details that were shared during the interview. This process allowed the interviewer/researcher to view the data in detail and also allowed the thesis supervisor to evaluate or give a secondary analysis of the data. In addition, the data can be utilized in other studies or research areas that are not originally intended by the initial researcher(s).

The central purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. The

responses to the questions from the interviews are summarized and presented in a story form in the results section for each of the eight elite athletes. Most of the data from the interviews were utilized in the story form. Only repetitive information was omitted.

The main objectives of this study were three-fold, (a) to understand how each athlete attained his/her high level of success; (b) to explore what obstacles they faced on their way to the top of their sport and how they managed or overcame those obstacles; and, (c) to explore what advice they would give to young First Nations, Inuit, or Métis athletes who want to attain a similar high level goal in sport.

For the first objective, the success elements were identified when reading through the transcripts. The success elements are listed in table 2. In this study, elements were chosen as common success elements if four (50%) or more of the eight elite athletes mentioned them in their interviews.

For the second objective on obstacles, there were three questions that were asked during the interview that was focused on. They were, (1) What were the biggest challenges or distractions you faced as an athlete on this journey?; (2) Did you experience any distractions before or during your best-ever performance? If yes, what was the distraction and how did you focus through the distraction?; and (3) Did you experience and distractions, doubts or negative thoughts before or during your less than best performance? If so, what was the distraction? Were you able to focus through the distraction? If not, why do you think you were not able to refocus and get back on a positive track? The obstacles are listed in table 3.

For the last objective, there were three questions asked during the interviews that pertained to advice. The three questions are as follows, (1) What do you think could be done in your community right now to help other young people or developing athletes achieve the high

levels of performance excellence that you achieved?; (2) What advice do you have for young First Nations athletes who want to become great performers in their chosen sport?; and, (3) What do you think you have learned in sport that you are applying or can apply to other areas of your life? Each of the athletes' responses from these three questions are presented in table 4 in point form.

Confidentiality

Gratton and Jones (2010) explain that confidentiality is an important part of qualitative research. Participants need to be informed as to who will have access to the research, what will be done with the data, and how long the data will be retained. Participants should also be given the option to use a pseudonym. It is the researcher's role to explain these boundaries to participants before interviewing them (Gratton & Jones, 2010, p. 123) and this was respected in this study.

According to Orlick, people who have performed at very high levels in sport or other performance disciplines almost always choose to have their names associated with their comments or stories (Orlick, personal correspondence, May 2012). The researcher sent individual interview transcripts back to each athlete, and asked them to read their transcript and add or delete anything they might want to add or delete. They were also asked if they would prefer to have their names associated with their comments or prefer that we not use their names. All eight elite athletes chose to have their name associated with this study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using narrative analysis. According to Wells (2011), narrative analysis is a form of qualitative research and is used when a researcher is interested in the content of the stories told by the participants. Smith and Sparkes (2009) explain that narrative

analysis can be viewed as an umbrella term with two main standpoints, story analyst and storyteller. A story analyst looks at the story as raw data; steps back to think about it; and then explains the data using analyzed strategies, theories, and techniques (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). A storyteller is like the story analyst in that both are interested in the actual stories and what they mean. However, Smith and Sparkes (2009) explain that with a storyteller, the "analysis is the story"(p.282). Storytellers do not add an extra layer of analysis and instead look to the story as the analysis. With this method, no further analysis is needed as the story itself is the rich detailed data. Stories help people to comprehend aspects of their lives and that is what theories and analysis aim to do, therefore stories are analytical (Smith and Sparkes, 2009).

Grbich (2007) also describes narrative analysis as two main types, socio-linguistic and socio-cultural. Socio-linguistic analysis, which is similar to the storyteller described above, focuses on the formation of events and how it expresses meaning in the text. Socio-cultural analysis, which is similar to the story analyst above, examines the broader aspects of the story and how people make sense of the everyday events. Grbich (2007) further states that combining the two versions would provide the best analysis, and that it is best to use narrative analysis when the research is focused on the formation of the stories, or on distinctive experiences of particular events. In this study, the two versions of storyteller and story analyst were combined as described below.

This study utilized the storyteller method of narrative analysis, as this study presents the content of the individual stories and the unique experiences of each elite athlete. Stories were put together by the researcher from segments of each of the interviews, via starting with background information, then leading to how each athlete overcame obstacles and obtained success in sport, and ending with lasting lessons and advice. Furthermore, success elements and obstacles were

extracted from each interview to compare and contrast with other interviews. The success elements are compiled in table 2 and the obstacles are listed in table 3. Finally, meaningful lessons for young Aboriginal athletes were also extracted and are listed in table 4.

NVivo 9, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), was used in the analysis of this study, to aid in organizing the written data (Davis & Meyer, 2009). This software was developed to assist the researcher in the analytical phase of the research, which aids in managing very large amounts of data (Davis & Meyer, 2009). For this study, NVivo was utilized to organize the success elements, obstacles, and advice for young Aboriginal athletes.

Trustworthiness

In this study, member validation was utilized to establish trustworthiness. According to Gratton & Jones (2010), member validation is when the interview transcripts are sent back to the participants so they can validate, add to, alter or clarify the content of the interview and offer their feedback on the accuracy of the content. The thesis supervisor also read and reviewed all of the athlete's transcripts.

Results

The main objectives of this study were three-fold, (a) to understand how each athlete attained his/her high level of success; (b) to explore what obstacles they faced on their way to the top of their sport and how they managed or overcame those obstacles; and, (c) to explore what advice they would give to young First Nation, Inuit, or Métis athletes who want to attain a similar high level goal in sport. The results of these objectives are first presented in tables 2, 3 and 4 followed by the narratives of each of the eight elite Aboriginal athletes.

Success Elements

Table 2 displays the success elements in detail of each of the elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes. In this study, success elements were chosen if four (50%) or more of the eight elite athletes had them in common. The success elements consisted of six different themes: Aboriginal elements, focus, mental preparation for competition, passion, positive self-talk, and parental support. The two most dominant success elements found in this study were focus and parental support.

Table 2. Success elements of elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes.

	Athlete	Sport	Success elements
1	Mary Spencer	Boxing	Commitment Focus Goal setting Mental preparation for competition Motivation Passion Support-parental and coach
2	Dallas Soonias	Volleyball	Focus Mental preparation for competition Support-parental Trust in oneself
3	John Chabot	Hockey	Commitment Confidence Focus Goal setting Mental preparation for competition Passion Positive self-talk Support-parental
4	Gino Odjick	Hockey	Aboriginal elements Focus Mental preparation for competition Passion Positive self-talk Support-parental and coach Trust in oneself
5	Jordin Tootoo	Hockey	Aboriginal elements Focus Mental preparation for competition Passion Support-parental and community
6	Billy Mills	Track and field	Aboriginal elements Focus Imagery Passion Positive self-talk Support-parental and coach
7	Waneek Horn-Miller	Water-polo	Aboriginal elements Commitment Focus Positive self-talk Support-parental Trust in oneself
8	Caroline Calve	Snowboarding	Focus Mental preparation for competition Support-parental

Obstacles

Table 3. A list of the elite athletes and their identified obstacles.

Athlete	Sport	Obstacle
Mary Spencer	Boxing	Having a dream that didn't exist, as boxing was not in the Olympics for seven years of her career
Dallas Soonias	Volleyball	Maintaining focus and concentration on school and sport, instead of having fun
John Chabot	Hockey	Loss of friends
Gino Odjick	Hockey	Leaving his small community
Jordin Tootoo	Hockey	Adversity of being Aboriginal Leaving home Growing up in harsh environments
Billy Mills	Track and Field	Being a type 2 diabetic Racism
Waneek Horn-Miller	Water-polo	Racism Preconceived notions of being Native
Caroline Calve	Snowboarding	Started sport late; feelings of being an imposter; feelings of being behind in the sport compared to others

Advice for young athletes

Table 4. Advice for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth.

	Athlete	Advice to youth
1	Mary Spencer, Boxing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to participate in sport is number one • Ensure the sport is available • Do more than what is expected of you • Some lessons can only be learned through experience • Focus is huge • Important to be able to perform at the right time
2	Dallas Soonias, Volleyball	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to play • Opportunity to advance in the game • You can take something useful away from every coach • Take something from every athlete • Teamwork is key • Set goals
3	John Chabot, Hockey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental support is huge • Find something you love • Work hard • Show up • Do not let mistakes knock you down • Learn from your mistakes • Be positive
4	Gino Odjick,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your happiness is just one thought away • The most important thing is to think properly

	Athlete	Advice to youth
	Hockey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical fitness is key • Focus is important • Do everything with integrity • Work hard • Teamwork is important • Creating a good environment is important • The way you perceive yourself is the way you project yourself
5	Jordin Tootoo, Hockey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach kids to help each other out and be a helping hand • Enjoy what you are doing • Do not be afraid to try something new • The more education you have, the better opportunities you have • Surround yourself with good quality people • Do what is best for you • How you handle your distractions is key • Be true to yourself • Take one step at a time • Have fun • Stay grounded • Make sure to stay in the best shape possible
6	Billy Mills, Track and Field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize sport as a catalyst • Challenge our young people to read • Compare yourself to other athletes across to country • It's the journey, not the destination, that empowers us • It's the daily decisions we make in life, not just the telling we possess that choreographs our destiny
7	Waneek Horn- Miller, Water-polo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live in the moment, be in the moment, play in the moment • There needs to be a strategic approach to develop our athletes • We need to develop our coaches • Everyone can learn from sport • Everyone can have fun in sport • You have to be prepared to go above and beyond • Native athletes have to be better than their non-Native competition • Be prepared for it to be tough grueling work to get where you want to go • Ensure you have done absolutely everything in your power to achieve whatever the top of your mountain is • Perseverance is key
8	Caroline Calve, Snowboarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth are inspired by what you have achieved as an athlete • They are inspired for it to be their goals and dreams • I think we have to dare to dream • We all have greatness in ourselves • You really need people encouraging you • It takes determination • What is great about losing is that you get a chance to learn something • You need discipline • You need to set goals

Elite athlete's stories

The central purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. All of the eight elite athlete stories are presented below to share their personal journeys of excellence. A summary of each athlete is presented first and then each athlete shares their own story in their own words.

Athlete 1: Mary Spencer

Mary Spencer is a 29 year old female boxer who was born on December 12, 1984 and resides in Windsor, Ontario. She is a member of the Chippewas of Nawash and started boxing when she was 16 years old. She won three World Championships, five Pan American Games gold medals and eight Canadian Championships.

Mary Spencer's story:

I played a lot of basketball, volleyball, soccer, track and field and cross country running. I tried a lot of different sports. The first time I went to a boxing club, was because a friend of mine wanted to get in shape and she wanted a friend to join her, so I did that. I went for a few weeks. The second group of training that I did was, after I lost a basketball game, I wanted to do this cross training again, so I went back to the gym to do the workout, but I went at the wrong time and there were all of these athletes training. I saw the athletes training and I knew I wanted to do that, and not just for fitness, but for sport. So I started doing that. I was 16 at that point.

I was an athlete my entire life. I always thought that my dream would be to make a career out of being an athlete. I always thought that would be great. Always! There is this game and I forget what it is called but it's a card game, and you always try and end

up with the best possible situation. You have, like a house and a car and I always wanted to be an athlete with a sports car. I forget what the card game was, but I always wanted to be the athlete. I loved it. I had ideas in my mind when I was a kid, but never actually a goal that I was striving towards. They were just like far off dreams I imagined. I never tried to put it to practice or saw it happening.

Everything kind of happened quickly for me. I remember the first day that I saw these athletes training when I returned to the gym, I met a coach who wanted to show me some stuff and he was very encouraging. He was really excited and he complimented me like crazy and he told me, “You know what? If you train for a year, if you train every morning with me for a year, you could be a Canadian champion”. So that was really encouraging for me, you know, to get that kind of feedback. So I did have aspirations of being the Canadian champion on my first day in the gym. So I started seeing the work paying off and I started seeing myself improve, then it was easy for me to think that I was going to get better, because I had people around me who, well they thought I was talented, and they didn’t keep it to themselves. They told me and it really encouraged me. I needed that encouragement and I needed that confidence to be able to excel. My first day when he told me that I could be Canadian Champion in one year, I believed him. It was not typical, especially for me, because I played a lot of other sports. There were a lot of sports I was good at, but my downfall was, that I wasn’t confident in my abilities. So for me to come across this sport, and be confident in my abilities, that I had not proven yet, I mean it was day one. How could I have confidence from day one? But I did and that made a huge difference. I credit a lot of that to the coach that I met, because he was just very encouraging, and he built up that confidence, and that’s what I needed. Well

that particular coach, you know six months into training with him said, “You know what? You’re going to be really good, and I want to introduce you to the best coach in this city, and he’s going to take you to that level”. That was awesome of him. You don’t see many coaches do that a lot and especially in boxing. You see the coaches become selfish, and they want people to know that they have trained this athlete, and they don’t think of anybody else except themselves. But he took me to another gym, which was actually the rival gym from where we were training, and said, “This is Charlie Stewart. He has been to a couple of Olympics. He is a level five coach and I want him to take a look at you, and see what he thinks, and maybe he’ll train you”. So I think that was incredible. You don’t see that in any sport, but especially not in boxing. Coaches are usually very selfish for their fighters. So then I started training with Charlie after that.

I have to give a lot of credit to Charlie Stewart, my coach. He was there at my first fight, and every fight since then. He went above and beyond what was ever expected of any coach. He didn’t just say you know, “Show me that you want it”. He said, “What can I do to make it easier for you so that we can accomplish this goal together?” You know what I mean. A lot of coaches would be like, “I train at six a.m. and show me that you want to work hard by showing up at six a.m.”, and Charlie said, “Where do you live? Let me pick you up”. He knew that I lived across town, and that I did not have a ride to the club, so he came and picked me up. You know it was not convenient. It was not on the way for him. He went from the west side of town to the east side of town to pick me up, and then drove back to the west side to where the gym was. I mean he did that every single day. He woke me up every day with a phone call to make sure I was up getting ready and, you know, ten years later, he still calls me every morning and says, “I’ll see

you at the gym at six a.m.”. He’s done way more than what is expected of any coach, and you know, he doesn’t get a coach’s salary. Now that I’m in this position, there are benefits for him. I do pay him. For the first nine years of training, there was nothing in it for him. He just retired from GM, and he was living off of his retirement pension, and he does this as something that he is passionate about. So number one, I would have to say him, but there have been a lot of people, that helped support me. I mean my family has been extremely supportive. I see a lot of athletes, I mean, that could be a downfall that, you know, if you don’t have a family that is completely supportive, or sometimes a family that is too involved, can be detrimental. My family just said “You know what, if you want to do it, that’s cool”. They would be really respectful. I was living at my mom’s house, and I have a lot of siblings. A lot of people would be there, and I would go to bed early, and everyone would quiet down in the house, because I had to get up early and train. That’s unique and special, and I really owe a lot to my family. When I’m getting ready for competitions, my mom would change the meals to what she was cooking, and everybody would eat according to the kind of stuff that I had to have before a competition. It was really nice.

I had a dream to go into the Olympics, and boxing wasn’t even in the Olympics, so until 2009 we weren’t, and I have been boxing since 2002, so for seven years of my career, I had this goal that was hard to even talk about because people would say, “Oh I never even seen women boxing in the Olympics”. And I would say “Oh well, it’s not there”. This is my dream and my goal and it’s not even in the Olympics so that was tough. And there were a lot of boxers who found it really hard for them to stay motivated, because once they made it to world championship level, which was the highest level that

you could do, they had to find a different goal, and it was hard to find a goal for something that did not exist yet, so they would get out of the sport and do something else by then.

I always just believed that it was going to happen, and I stayed motivated. That was one of the most difficult things ever. It's really neat you know, because it's not one of those goals where you kind of follow after someone else's footsteps. You have to create it yourself. I mean I can't say, I want to be like this other boxer who went to the Olympics, because there was no other woman who went to the Olympics for boxing. I just make it up in my head. You couldn't mirror somebody else. You couldn't look at what they did in their career, and look how things worked out for them, and learn lessons that way. Everything was brand new, and you just kind of went like, this is my goal, and this is my dream, so I just had to do what I could do, and make good decisions, and make the best of it.

We found out in the summer of 2009 that there would be Olympic categories but that there would only be three of them. So it was 51, 60 and 75 kilograms. I was fighting in 64 kilo's, and I was the Canadian Champion at 64, and so it was either, I can go down to 60, or up to 75, and I was so tiny at 64 kilo's, and that extra 9 pounds to go down to 60 kilo's, well I didn't have 9 pounds to lose, as I was way too small already, 64 was already a natural for me. So if I was going to go to the Olympics I was going to go up to 75 kilo's and that's a big jump. It's not even just me getting bigger, it's my opponents are now getting tougher, and my opponents are now 25 pounds heavier than what I was used to fighting at. So that was a big jump. My spar partners had to change. I had to start sparring with big guys, and, that was one of my biggest accomplishments, the 2010 World

Championships, because number one, it's a world championship, every world championship is going to be hard. Number two, it's a world championship in an Olympic division, and number three, I had just recently made a jump into that category. In 2009, I was the 64 kilogram Canadian Champion, and in 2010, I was the 75 kilogram World Champion. That was my third World Championship.

For the Olympics, there were different things that I really had to prepare for, and I realized in the first, well in the last three years leading up to the Olympics, I was trying to peak for the national championship, because my toughest opponent was from Canada. I had to beat her at the national championship to go any further, so you can't just focus on the Olympics, when I have to get past her first; or if I focus on her, then it takes away from the Olympics because, if I'm peaking for January for fighting this girl, and then I'm forced to hold that peak for the next month, and you know, I change my focus from, focus on beating her, and now I have to take this motivation and take it to the Olympics. I mean, I don't know what the solution would be, but I know that made it different from many other competitions that I ever had in my life. There was so much happening. Everything was so new. It was just a crazy experience that I've never experienced before.

At the Olympics, things were definitely different. One of the things that was different was, I mean, I usually work with my team exclusively, my coaches. I do training camps, in my city, at my gym. I work with people that I'm used to and this time we went overseas. We did training camp, and I was under different coaches who were running the training camp, who were doing their own training routine that I was a part of. There was a good reason for that, and it was because there was a lot of media hype in Canada, with women's boxing making its debut, and they wanted me away from that, so I understand

that there was very good intentions, and at the time, I thought it was a great idea also but I look back at it and I think, it would have been better off training the way I've always done, because it's a tough thing to do, to change your preparations. We felt like it was the only option at the time. It just made things unfamiliar, and that's the last thing you want to do when you're trying to do something you've done for ten years, why put yourself in a position that was unfamiliar. The training was different, the atmosphere was different, and then I'm going to go to a tournament, and try and do what I've been doing for ten years, but I was just in an unfamiliar circumstance leading up to it. That was, I realize now, that it was a mistake, but it's something that we had to learn the hard way I guess. But yeah, it was a really exciting time too, because yeah, we are at the Olympics and this is serious now, and I had to get down to business.

Initially when I realized that things weren't right while I'm getting ready for this fight, I assumed it was because, well I'm in a different country, I'm in a new surrounding, because it's the Olympics. There's ten thousand people in this arena, there's millions of people around the world watching and I thought that was the problem, but when I look back at it, it's like, I had to go in this tournament that was new for me and boxing is not new for me, and I knew that the way I had prepared for this was not the same. And that is what I really think was the most distracting thing for me, even though at the time I tried to think it was other things. Looking back at it now, it's like I've been in situations where there were big crowds and it was new, like I had my first national championship, that was brand new for me. I had my first world championship, that was brand new for me. And now I had my first Olympics, and I thought those feelings of uncertainty were, because it was my first Olympics, but I never had it for my first championship, or my first World

Championship, or my first Pan Am games, I never had it. So I think the only thing that was different in this circumstance, was my preparation for it, and that is why I had an uneasy feeling.

Yeah it's like everyone did expect me to bring home the gold medal, but I expected that of myself, so I don't feel like that was anything wrong. It didn't make me feel uncomfortable when people said, "Hey Mary's going to take home the gold medal". I was like, "Damn right I am!" So it's not like, I was hoping to do my best and people were saying, "You're going to get a gold medal", and so I felt pressured to get the gold medal. I was like "Friggen right I 'm going to get a gold medal. You know like, I'm glad you're on board". So I wouldn't say that peoples' expectations really put a lot of pressure on me, because I know leading to any tournament, that everyone expects me to win. Coaches from other countries, who have girls competing against me, they expect me to win. So, I mean, peoples expectations, I don't think played a big part.

Honestly it took a long time, it took a good two months after that fight for me to look back, and understand what happened, to be able to assess what happened, and to be able to take a lesson from it, and to be able to move forward, to be honest. What I learned is, that no matter if you're better than the person, or you beat them in the past or not, the most important thing is being able to perform at the right time. That is so key, it's not even funny. Will I know if I learned from that lesson when I am forced to perform, which hasn't been, but it will come very soon, and I'll see if I could put that into practice. I know in my mind I learned a lesson, but I need to be able to put it into practice.

There are so many lessons I learned in boxing. I mean, focus is huge, even just looking at a smaller picture of the eight minutes that you are in the ring. You can't let

little things get to you because that throws off your game plan, and so who's getting screwed in the end. It's me that's going to get screwed in the end, cause I'm not going to perform the right way, so that's a lesson that you could learn in life. Little things, you know, sometimes just let them go, and don't let them get to you because it's only going to hurt yourself in the end. So that's something I learned, you know honestly, in the ring, not just, you know, in the whole big picture of sport, but in the ring. I've learned that lesson at a very early stage in my career. I've gained confidence from boxing because, I've done so many things in my life that I never thought I could do, because I always looked at it like, if I can get into a ring and fight someone who wants to take my head off in front of thousands of people, then why I can't I do this, different things like, speaking in front of groups. When I was in high school, I couldn't even get up in front of my class and give a speech and now I'm like, what's the big deal. I get up in front of people and fight someone, so it's talking and you can't be anything compared to that, so I'm able to do that. I remember one time I went skydiving. I hate heights and I hate falling, but the only thing that was going through my head that, you know kept me sane, at this moment was, this is nothing compared to fighting at a world championship. So I was able to jump out of the plane like no big deal, because you know after doing something in sport, you want to achieve something so badly, you have to put yourself in a position (you know) where you are not comfortable, where you are pushing yourself to a different level.

At this point in my life I am super excited. I can't even tell you how excited I am about all the training that I'm involved in now and I'm looking forward to the next four years. I plan on going to Rio. I still have a goal of bringing home the gold medal. I have lessons learned in the last few years that could only be learned through experience, and I

learned them first hand, and that's the best way to learn things. Well sometimes you like to avoid learning things first hand, but I mean, you definitely get to learn it, when you learn it firsthand. Yeah I'm looking forward to the training. There are some things I am going to change and there are some things I want to keep the same. I'm looking forward to it, I really am. I feel like I've matured as a person and as an athlete over the last few years, that's going to make a big difference as well.

I think it's really important to have motivation, and know what your motivation is, to know why you want to be the best because if you're just training to be the best, and you have no reason for it, then it's really easy to give up. But if you have a reason for wanting to be the best, and even better, if it's a very unselfish reason, if you want to do it for someone else, or something else, that's even better, because in those times when you want to quit, if you're doing it all for you, it might be easy to quit, or if you don't know why you're doing it at all, it might be easy to quit. But if you know why you're doing it, and if it's for something that's very special to you, then for those times when it gets very hard, you're not going to be able to quit. So I think it's really important to recognize where your motivation is coming from, why you have it, and what it is.

I have a lot of different reasons for wanting to go to the Olympics. One of them was so that my mom could see me competing in the Olympics. I mean, that was something I thought about as a young kid. But, also a motivation for me, this motivation grows on a daily basis, its being a source of inspiration for Aboriginal people. That's huge for me. That's going to keep me going for the next four years.

There are days when I get that phone call from my coach in the morning, and I'm like "oh god", and that can happen, but it's normal. And to try and pretend that that's not

going to happen ever, is crazy. Of course it's going to happen. There are going to be days when you don't feel like training, days when I would rather sleep in or take a rest. That's fine. It doesn't necessarily mean that you lost your motivation. As long as you still feel passionate about it. Don't be afraid of those days that you're not enjoying running ten miles. You know, don't freak out if there are days when you're not enjoying getting to the ring, and getting punched in the face at six am. But you know, after any of these moments where I had these feelings, I can definitely say that, you know what, I'm still passionate about this, I still want to win. I'm still able to do what I need to do to win. And that's how I know that it's still there.

Opportunity is the number one thing, and having sports available is obviously key. Like for me, I didn't know for a very big part of my life that I was able to try boxing until I was 16, and a friend of mine took me to the gym. I didn't even know that that was an option for me, because seriously, when I was 12 years old, if someone brought me to the boxing club, I would have been there in a second. But I didn't realize that that was an option. For a lot of these kids and in my community, that is not an option. It's not just that they don't know about it. It really isn't. There's no boxing club for them or even other sports that they might excel in- It's not an option for them. I mean there are a few other sports, like all of the kids play hockey and baseball, but you never know what sport is really going to grab you, so having the opportunity to try different stuff, like you never know what's going to click with you, if you don't try it. I think that all of the time. I think, I wonder, I mean, I found boxing, but if I didn't find boxing, what would I do? I would never know that I had the potential to be an Olympic boxer, or a world champion boxer, if I never walked into that gym. So, how many other kids are out there, and they

have no idea where their potential lies, because they are not given that opportunity, so I think that the number one thing is, offering a chance to give sports a try, and different ones too, not just the same ones.

Go the extra mile. Do the stuff that people aren't doing. I mean that is key, you know, if you just tell yourself to train the way everyone else is training, you don't really have a great chance of being a special athlete, if you're going to do the same thing as everyone else is doing. I think it's really key for athletes who want to be great at what they do, to make sure they do more than what the competition, more than the other people, who are trying to be good athletes also. You know if you're trying out for a team, and your whole team is running five miles a day, then you need to run six. You know, you have to always do more than what's expected of you, and never think that doing what people ask, is good enough. Because, if you want to be great, then you got to find it in yourself to go the extra mile (Mary Spencer, interviewed, January 2013).

Athlete 2: Dallas Soonias

Dallas is a 29 year old Cree First Nation volleyball player. He is a right side hitter with the Canadian men's National volleyball team. He was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on April 25, 1984 and has been playing volleyball since he was in grade nine.

Dallas Soonias' story:

My mom is from the Cape Croker reserve in Ontario. She's Ojibway. My dad is from Red Pheasant reserve in Saskatchewan. He's Cree. So I'm a mix of that. My parents are both highly educated, a bunch of degrees. I don't even have one, so I feel kind of silly but I guess I've done other stuff with my time so it's cool. I've done something good, something positive, so that's good. I have my brother Serene who's 30. I have a sister

Venta and a sister Merna who are quite a bit older than me. I grew up in Red Deer so yeah it was a city, it's a small city. It was between 60 and 80 when I grew up and now I think it's like 90,000.

I had a lot of opportunity to play sport, enough to play any sport I wanted and I did. I played every sport. So many sports! That's how I picked one. I started volleyball. I started in grade eight. I don't really count it though because I played one tournament, I played one tournament and then I got kicked off the team. When I started in grade eight, it was more just something to do. I had no goals at the time and I just kind of wanted to learn how to play. My attitude-It was so bad. I was just yelling at teammates who sucked. It was awful of me. I was terrible. I was a jerk. I mean, I wasn't any better really. So that was that.

I got to grade nine and in the summer, I thought, in terms of this sport, I could probably reach a high level. I was kind of like, I'm taller than everyone, and most of the tall guys were like goofy you know, but I had control over my body and a lot of other dudes didn't. So I figured, unless I quit this, I could probably go somewhere.

The first time I started making goals in volleyball was in grade nine. I started playing club volleyball and the coach had played university ball and stuff, and he was the coach of the college, then he thought that I had the potential to be a university player. Then I thought about it and thought, like I think I can go farther than that. I want to be number seven on the national team. So I think grade nine was when I made the goal, and knew what I wanted to do and that summer, I realized, holy crap, I could probably play for school with this little volleyball. So that was when I realized I could potentially do something with the sport.

The next year I played in grade nine. All my friends were on the team. I didn't get kicked off. And we had fun. And then after that, after the high school season is club volleyball season, so I played that. Then after that, they have a provincial team in the summer, so I tried out for that and they took me then so I just, that was like a full year of volleyball, because up until that time, I was playing a lot of different sports. So I just kind of kept playing because I enjoyed it. It was different and I'd always been a basketball player mainly, but I did lots of things. So I wanted to do something different than what my brother was doing. He was a basketball player. I chose volleyball because it was fun and new, so I just kind of went with it, and played pretty much year round all through high school, and then I went to Red Deer College and played there, and that's a four year thing. Then in the summer I played with the National team, with the junior National team, and we went to the World Championships. That was cool. That was the Junior World Championships. That was in Iran. That was nuts, kind of scary actually. Everyone had guns and stuff. And then after two years on this team, I went to the University of Alberta and we won my first year, that was fun and that was the year that I joined the senior National team. Then the next year at U of A, we got second at Nationals, that sucked.

Well basically, in college, the national team coach was doing like a tour of Canada going to all sorts of little places like putting on a lecture. Really he was just, I don't know, anyways he came to like different colleges and stuff and would like lecture for an hour, and then do like a four hour training session. So I went to the four hour training session. I was actually really sick that day. I didn't go to school. I hardly got out of bed but I played and then after that, he invited me to come and train in the summer so that's what I did. I didn't really have a tryout. It was more just, he saw me and thought I

had potential and that's how I joined and that was in 2004. So that was university. Then after that I stayed with the national team for the winter. So it was just playing volleyball professionally or with the national team around. Then I started playing pro in the winter, professionally for a club in Europe. So I played in Poland. I played actually in a ton of places but I started in Poland. So yeah I've been playing pro for like seven years now. Usually national team in the summer then professionally in the winter. So yeah that's the short version.

My parents, they've been very, very supportive. Even when I was a complete jerk, like, whenever we lost, I would just lose my mind, and I just kind of dealt with it. And win or lose, they would say, you played a hell of a game. And I'm sure they knew, I was going to be like, oh whatever, don't give me that crap, I played shitty. But they were very supportive.

I'm very lucky in that I had great coaches the whole way through, it was half luck and half like I had seeked out the good coaches. Yeah I was very lucky. All my coaches have a lot to do with where I am, well with where I was.

I think generally I'll be well prepared and focused for what I want to do, which I kind of always am, but I'll be enjoying myself from the start. I just decided that. And a lot of the time I'll be like, music will be going through my head or something, so I'm very focused on what I'm doing, but it's like a soundtrack in the back of my head type thing. It sounds very strange to say that out loud but that's kind of what's happening.

In volleyball, you have to have other people touching the ball. You can't do it alone. So I always try to prepare the same. I just be ready to play well, to try to help others but it doesn't always happen you know. I find when I try to plan out exactly what

I'm going to do, it doesn't always work out, like from play to play. But things work out much better when I just react to what they are doing. Like instead of saying, okay they generally do this, so I'm going to do something else. What works better certainly for me is to have a pretty clear blank slate of what I'm going to do, until I see what my opponents are doing. Because there is a split second and it just becomes second nature when you're in the air, and see what they're doing, and you could see the defenders as well, and then you just hit it where they aren't, kind of, as hard as you can. It's very simple, you know, but it's more not trying to pre-determine what's going to happen.

There are certain things you can exploit certainly, but even say like there's two guys blocking and one guy is the shorter guy, it makes sense to go at that guy. But for me it seems that when I think about doing it, and I try to make it perfect, that's when I make errors. But when you go, say you're up in the air and there's a block, and one guy is really high and one guys low, you just hit at the low guy, because that just makes sense of what you should do in that situation, but when I think about it before and you try to make it perfect, perfectly over this little guy, that's when I make errors.

If I'm ever having a good game and someone show's me the stats that I'm having, it's like talking to a pitcher in middle of what could be a perfect game. As soon as I see the stats that I'm doing really well, I'll screw it up for sure. So I just make sure that people don't show me my stats. Because whatever I'm doing is working you know, just being in the moment. That's the key, is to stay in the moment, not look at it from like a third person point of view, you know.

There can be things that distract you, but like the crowd is never an issue or anything like that. Personally, I never look at the crowd and then people will get upset

with me, because they'll wave and I'll have no recollection of it, because I'm just focused on the court, you know. But there have been times where I have been really upset or bothered something before a game and it'll pretty much be out of my head, but the emotion of that feeling or that thought gave me, sticks with me through the game, so I'll be upset the whole game, but I'll be focused on the right things. See what I'm saying. So that's a bit rough when that happens. You try to leave it outside the gym but sometimes it's hard to get rid of the emotion of it.

Well inadvertently, I've learned team work which I'm finding out, everybody, I thought people just understood that, it turns out people don't understand teamwork very well. Like what employers do is group team working exercises and stuff to teach people that. People innately want to take care of themselves obviously, which makes sense, so working in a team situation I've learned that is how to work hard I guess. That's going to come in handy, I'm pretty sure. I've learned to just do things and, I guess not so much be worried about the outcome, the final goal. Or it's just going through the process and dealing with the process or whatever it is to get to this final goal.

I can remember games when our team did absolutely terribly and now that I think about it I actually didn't play too bad in those games. Then I can remember crushing defeats. I am learning now that I'm away from the sport, that I've been pretty consistent in my performances. It's rare that I'll have a terrible game. It's more like our team will have a terrible game. So I can remember some very crushing defeats and I can remember games when I did play bad and that was really awful like at the World Championship and I think that was 2010 maybe. I was playing a new position. I didn't know I would be playing that position, but they threw me in because we were losing, to try and shake

something up, and I'd been doing well in that position like a month earlier, but I hadn't played that position in a while, and I actually did really bad, and it really hasn't been very many times where I've been really bad, and not been able to help in some way. This was probably, actually really bad. I think I lost the team three points in a row without somehow getting three points back. That was probably the worst recently. I wasn't prepared. I didn't know I'd be doing this different job.

Even that, I've been thrown into weird situations and I've done well. I don't know. I don't know. But I can think of other times when our team lost, I was more focused on not so much winning the game but not losing the game and eventually we lost. I think in those situations when things are going wrong, you really got to claw your way back. Sometimes what helps me is, I think about what I'm fighting for. Like if there's something else other than just winning. I don't know, like pride, or a bonus, or a day off, but at that point you're playing to win, and that's not working, so you kind of need some other motivation to keep going, so that tends to help. And if you don't win, you're not getting a day off for another month. I mean when things are that tight, and you want some freedom, yeah a day off is huge.

The first practice down in Puerto Rico this year. I started, well I was going to play for a team in Puerto Rico. We had a long practice. Yeah I probably shouldn't have been going that long my first day back. It was the last serve I hit, of course it's always the last serve you hit. I hit it really good and hard. But I felt like, well something really painful in my shoulder happened. It got really hot. I couldn't really move it. So I tried to rehab. I didn't know what was wrong for the next month. It really hurt. Then I went and got an MRI then they told me, "you need some surgery". So I flew home right away. I couldn't

get surgery here. I would have still been waiting. So I went down to California, paid it privately, which was much quicker so that was good. So now I'm just trying to recover.

I tore my rotator cuff, more specifically my supraspinatus. It was like a 20% tear or something. So I have a hole in the middle of my ligament, but it wasn't a full thickness tear, so they didn't stitch it up. They just shaved off the fragments so they cleaned it up they said. I also have a slap tear, it's like, I don't know, it's fairly severe. But not so severe that the surgeon felt he had to fix it so and also they did an AC re-sectioning on my shoulder or it's called a Mumford procedure where they shave down my clavicle, shave over my acromiun. So I got some bones that are gone. Also I got an acromioplasty because I had a very severe hook on the end of my shoulder that was running into my humerus every time I lifted it or every time I swung. So I couldn't swing straight up, it was always out to my side a bit so what they did was, they shaved that bone off so I don't have as big of a hook and my shoulder can now swing straight up if I recover. The problem is, my shoulder is pretty loose in my socket because part of my cuff has been torn away, so my humerus kind of floats around now, so we'll see in the next month and a half. Rehab, I could recover that somehow, we'll see. Just trying everything I can to get back. If I can't then I can't I guess. Or maybe I'll need another procedure or something, we'll see.

I've been playing this sport constantly for a very long time, what feels like a long time, over 10 years, and this is the first time, because of my shoulder surgery, that I can't play and I have no real connection to the national team right now, because I can't train, and all I'm doing is rehabbing, so it's kind of like my identity is gone, because I've been a big part of volleyball. So I'm focused on myself basically, and trying to figure out what

I'm going to do if I don't heal, you know, so there are things that come with that.

For me, I think it might just be because I'm the youngest, I grew up with people older than me who I was trying to keep up with. So when it came to sport, I always wanted to play up. It was good that I did that because I was always, it was very rare that I was the best, so I was always trying to be the best. And that felt good certainly when you were playing with older kids that you can hang with them and sometimes beat them. It's good. I'd say always try to play the highest level you can without getting destroyed, a place where you can learn.

Set goals as well. Although I can't really do that right now because I'm in limbo. I don't know if I'm going to be back or if I'm not.

Even crappy coaches have something to teach, something you can take from them, so it may be hard, but you have to fish around to take something useful. Even if it's just, I mean I had to do this in my professional career, is learning how to deal with a coach who knows nothing you know. Take something from every athlete, and take the opportunity to do stuff when you have it, because they don't come around all the time, certainly in a remote area, you know. So jump on the opportunity!

It's nice to represent your country but it's also nice to represent your people first. We kind of need more positive role models so it's kind of great to be one, to try to be one (Dallas Soonias, interviewed, January 2013).

Athlete 3: John Chabot

John Chabot is a retired professional ice hockey player who has played 508 games with the National Hockey League (NHL). John is an Algonquin Anishinabe from Kitigan Zibi,

Quebec. He was born on May 18, 1962 in Summerside, Prince Edward Island. He speaks to young kids and runs hockey camps across Canada and owns his own business called Anishinabeg Communications.

John Chabot's story:

I started playing before five. The energy I had as a child lead itself to being particularly active, plus my older brother Paul played hockey, and played a different sport that I always partook in. It started in North Bay, Ontario but really took off in Cold Lake, Alberta. The first couple times that I skated in North Bay were very short. I would get on the ice, skate for a couple of seconds, fall down, cry and go home. That happened two or three times, and then, you know, my dad thought that it was a waste of time, sending me to the rink then he comes home 15 minutes later, so he could do it for a full, for the rest of the winter. Then the next year I went back to the rink and I could skate. So from that point on it was, my dad built a rink in my back yard in Cold Lake, Alberta. My dad was in the Air Force and I skated every morning before I went to school, and then when I came home from school, and after dinner, and I skated as much as I could really. I just played hockey all the time when that rink was back there. I think that was, that more than anything else was, why I became a high level player, the amount of hours that I put out early, early in my life. It's not like you play because you want to play professional hockey, but you play because you love it. I could play anytime I wanted to when I was a kid. Afterwards we moved to Halifax and again and the rink was community owned by the Sorcerers. I was literally breaking in, and began to wake in the morning before school with the full understanding that the ice, the rink manager knew that I was doing it, and I didn't think he did, but my dad tells me he did, and that as long as I kept it clean, and

make sure you don't leave anything behind. My dad was right. I was there all of the time. I made a couple of friends and we played hockey all of the time. It was a fantastic beginning. We played on a team but the most fun I had was when I played with my friends. Those years, I guess playing hockey just for the enjoyment of playing, were great. I have great memories of it. I have memories of Cold Lake but I was quite young. I have memories of sneaking in the rink and playing hockey. It was fantastic, it really was. My family went to Halifax and from Halifax we went to Gatineau, Quebec. I played hockey from the age of peewee until I graduated midget. I got drafted in the Quebec Major Junior League and from there I was going to a NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) school, and signed a letter of intention to go to Bowling Green University in Ohio. At the last second, well I was only 16, I graduated high school when I was 16, I was too young. I wasn't quite sure enough that I wanted to make a decision like that quite early in my life, I decided to go, but then I decided to stay home. So I played hockey with the Hull Olympiques for a couple years and then I ended up getting traded to the Sherbrooke Beavers in my last year of Junior Hockey. We had a fantastic year. We went to the Memorial Cup. We had good players and good guys and guys I still see today. I went to Detroit after. We kind of went through the whole gamut of my life through Junior Hockey and without knowing it. Hockey's afforded me not just an opportunity to play hockey, but also I made some really good friends, and I meet and talk to these guys still. A good friend of mine just had his 50th birthday and I played hockey with him in peewee in Gatineau, Quebec. It's funny how it's just been a scene that's run through my whole life and continues to. After junior hockey, I got drafted by Montreal Canadians my second year, and then I went to Detroit for three years. I really liked it too.

My kids were born there. And then I played there for four years. And after Detroit I played in Europe in for 11 years playing in Italy, Germany, and for Team Canada, then I came back home. I stayed in hockey for coaching. I coached Major Junior and coached back in the NHL and now I'm working with hockey on education programs for the First Nations youth in the north of Canada. Hockey's been for me, besides my wife and my kids, the biggest and longest relationship I will ever have and it continues to this day.

My dad tells this story about when I was young living in Cold Lake and I was outside playing street hockey the whole summer. One of his friends came up to me and asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. And I told her I wanted to play in the NHL. I was very young when I said it. I don't remember it. It's a story he tells people because he said it was something I had as a kid. You know, I watched hockey as a kid. I was a regular Canadian boy. You know, I watched hockey on Saturday night, and would go outside and shoot on a rink in your back yard, and you go to bed with your hockey stick and skates. I mean I did all of that stuff. To say that you are dreaming of playing in the NHL as a four year old, well I think, well I don't remember dreaming of it, of being an NHL player. I played soccer in the summer with a gentleman called Peter. I truly enjoyed playing soccer as much as I enjoyed playing hockey. I love sports in general. To say that I wanted to be an NHL Player, I wanted to be an athlete more than anything else. I wanted to play sports. I played lacrosse. I played soccer. I played baseball. I played tennis. I played golf. I played hockey. I loved sports. To say that I was only fixated on playing in the NHL, I can't say that that's what it was, but I did say it as a kid, that as a goal, I would play in the NHL, because I saw it on TV.

To say that I started believing that I could play in the NHL, I believe I was in my

early teens. I was 12 years old and an NHL scout came to see me when I was playing in a tournament in Kingston, Ontario. And he told me, well he didn't tell me, he told my dad, "Well if your son keeps progressing then he has a chance to play at a higher level". So I started believing in it, but to say that I was completely fixated on it, I don't know if that was the case. I was fixated on sports in general. I loved to play sports. I played soccer as much as I played hockey. Soccer was an equal passion of mine. I played it for longer minor wise. I started playing soccer younger than when I started to play hockey. And the fact that there was no way to go beyond a certain level in Canada, back when I was growing up, and there was no professional leagues in Canada. There were leagues in Europe but not here in Canada. There was never really a thought to do that, so you know hockey became my sport of choice, because it was a sport I could go a little bit further in. And not to say I didn't want it, I truly did but like I said earlier on, I loved sports so much I just wanted to play sports. Those sports, hockey and soccer, I was the best at. I realized that at 12 years old I had a chance to play and then at 16, I was drafted in the Quebec Major Junior League, and then the next year I got drafted high in the NHL, it just pushed everything off to the side.

At that point in time, 15 years old was when I really buckled down. At the ages of 14, 15, I started making and setting goals for myself. I think I was 14 where I actually put a list down on the back of my door, and everyday when I'd get up, that would be the first thing I saw, and when I went to bed at night, it was the last thing I saw, so there were points of what I had to do every day, to become the best player I could be. I never set out to play in the NHL, and it was just to be the best player I could be, and at that point, I was in control. I was going to work towards that and it ended up working really well.

Well my parents of course, my family, they're telling stories of me eating steaks, and everybody else was eating hamburgers, and it's not a lie. I would have been happy to eat hamburgers. They just felt that to give me the chance, they would give me the chance, and for me to have the opportunities was as important as making it. My dad told me one time that my older brother showed some proficiency, but he never really gave him the opportunity, and not that he didn't give it to him, but that he didn't show any interest that maybe he should have. So he said to himself, "If John shows any interest, then I'm going to make sure that he knows that he has support that way", and he did. My dad would go to bed at two in the morning after a long day, and he was fixing the fence in my back yard in Cold Lake, Alberta. You know he'd get up early, and shovel, and ice it down, and water it down. And then living in Point Gatineau, we'd travel an hour and a half away at five am, to go to a practice that we got up and went to. We didn't practice at prime times. We practiced at five am or six am on a Saturday and a Sunday, when my parents have been at work all week and getting up at five am or six am, when they might have had a day to sleep in, they drove me. My family, well they put up with my crap. And like I said, I ate differently than my family because it was important that I ate well the night before the game. So we didn't have a lot of money. They scraped by to buy me sticks and skates. You know my first pair of skates were a couple of sizes too big, and a lot of my stuff was hand me downs, like any other American or Canadian boy playing hockey. But we needed sticks. We were playing with sticks that we got from the Esso gas station. If you bought a gallon of gas at Esso, they gave you a hockey stick and that's where my sticks came from. I remember my dad gluing them back together because they had broken, and we didn't have money to pay for them. The support that I got from my

family, as any parent would do for their own child, to a point I would tack it out, to me being a success.

I tell a story to kids when I go up north about decisions. When I was 13, my friends were, who I played with in Point Gatineau, they were my neighbours. They decided not to play hockey anymore, and they asked me not to play anymore either. So the day of the tryouts, I went to my dad that afternoon and I told him, "You know I don't think I'm going to go try out for hockey this year because all of my buddies are not going to play and they asked me to stay with them". He said take some time. Think about it and come back and see me in a couple of hours. Think about it. So I went back and I came back a couple of hours later and I said I was going to play. My friends went in that direction for the most part, and I still saw them, and not nearly as much as I had in the past, and I continued to play hockey. That was the biggest decision I had as a kid. That one day, you know I had to choose between my friends or choose between my hockey. Well I was 12 or almost 13. You know, I like my friends. You know, that's one thing that hockey does for you that never ends. As long as you play on a team, you know you got 15 or 20 friends. There might be a couple of guys you don't get along with great, but they are still your friends. You see them every couple of days and you hang out with them as much as you hang out with your family. So I had that opportunity, and even though my immediate and best friends were kind of moving in another direction, I still had a group of friends that I was going to be with nine months of the year, and they were completely different. I had no more friends, childhood friends from Point Gatineau. I was now moving on to a different phase and they were happy. Sometimes I think what could have been. I never regretted it by any stretch and I don't think my friends regretted it either.

They just didn't want to play anymore. It was a decision I had, and it was nice that I was able to make it on my own, and I wasn't told, well you should go play hockey. My dad just said, you know you make your decision. You know, it would have been easy for me not to play hockey, because they would have had their weekends free, and they would not have had to spend thousands of dollars every year that they didn't have.

There was one game I had. I was a first year player living in Gatineau, and we played against the Sherbrooke Beavers at the time, and they were the powerhouse of our league, and this was the first year in the playoffs. I thought I played about the best games I ever played. I was 17 years old and most of the guys were 19 or 20, so I was still a young boy playing or a young man playing against men. I knew I was a pretty talented guy, but you don't know how talented you are until you are pushed. And these guys were men, and they were big. At one point in time, they had a really tough player on their team and he was pushing around one of the young guys, so I stepped in, and my girlfriend who is now my wife, and she thought, "Oh my god, that John, what is he doing, he's going to get his head torn off". And for me, it was almost like a moment where I was taking that step towards being a player, and I think of that game quite often, and how if you put your mind to it and you really want to do it. It was not to say, I wasn't playing hockey but this was playing hockey. This was playing against men. We ended up losing the game six to four, or seven to four. I felt that I played the best game I played all year, and it was probably one of the best games I've played in my whole life, because of who we were playing against, what it meant, and the level I was having to play to sustain. And even after the game, to the press, I was validated by their coach saying, "I don't know, I know that Gatineau is a good team and what not, but if we want to win this series, we have to

watch that John Chabot a lot closer, because he could be a difference maker". You know, I was 17 years old and to me, it was a validation to a point, that I was going the right way. To me, that was the biggest game and I still think of that. That was 34 years ago. You know, I will be 51 in a month and that's still a point I think of every now and then, and that was a point that changed how I was going to go about playing.

The only ritual I liked to have if we had a morning skate, was making sure my skates had no mess and I could turn. I had to make sure that my edges were good where they weren't too sharp, and they were not sharp enough, and that my sticks, that I was comfortable with them. You know, even at the very end, I had to use a graphite stick. Every stick came different. You had a pattern and a curve. You had to make sure that the stick in your hand, for the game, was the one that you felt should be there. And the same with Guy Lafleur. He would get sent by Sherwood, six dozen sticks and he'd keep maybe 10 or 12, and send the rest back because they didn't feel good. I didn't do that. You know what I did, is I usually practiced with a stick that didn't feel good, and I played with a stick that did. You know Lafleur had that power where he could say, "You know, I got to like this stick, give me some more", and they would, and that's just Guy you know, he could do that. You know I'm John Chabot. I'm not Guy Lafleur.

I focus on, well it changed every now and then, because you got tired of it after a while. My biggest one was, "shoot the puck". As a forward on a first line, it was a tournament that we had the puck towards me, I wasn't going to glide, I was going to skate, and if I was moving my feet and skating to the puck, then I was very effective. So I made sure I'd take the puck so that was the last thing in my head, before the game started, which was before I went on the ice for warm-up, was to "keep the puck, keep the puck,

keep the puck, keep the puck", say it a couple of times. And it changed every now and then to like if I was struggling, I chanted, "keep it simple", instead of trying to make a little fancy play coming across the line, I would chip it in deep, and create a fore check, and I thought it was just as effective and not as fancy. It changed to how I was playing, and what was going on too, but my primary ones were, "keep the puck", "keep it simple", and at times when I found I wasn't contributing enough offensively it was, "shoot the puck" because I would stand in the path a lot more than I'd shoot. So those were my three phases before the games start I'd key in on what I needed to do that game.

Once things start to snowball, you start thinking, "If I want to make this better, what can I do"? You get on yourself a bit more and that happens to everybody. And that's what drives great athletes, not me, but great athletes. The ability to have that steer them, or the fear of that, makes them better hockey players. They don't want that feeling. And if you talk to any guy who is a high, high level player, who has achieved great success individually, that's one of the big driving factors, and that's the fear factor. They are afraid of failing and disappointment. Every athlete has it at one point in time, but the ones that can keep that, being afraid of failure, those are the Gretzky's. If you actually listen to him, he says it wasn't success that actually drove him, it was the fear of failure. The great athlete saying, you don't want to fall flat on your face. And every professional athlete has that, but the great ones are able to sustain it.

Never give up and always show up. Life isn't hard if you give it time, if you give it the time it deserves. I mean nobody's a success if they are not there. You don't make NHL players that make the NHL, if you don't show up to practice, and if you don't show up to play. Nobody graduates with a degree in psychology if you don't do the work and

show up to the class. If you show up to whatever you choose to do, by osmosis you are going to get better, and if you put in the work then you are going to get that much better. So those two things are probably the biggest things that I've learned through professional sport. My son, who is studying to be a doctor right now at McGill, and he played hockey until he was 20, he wanted to be an NHL player at one point in time, he realized that watching me work out and watching my friends work out was something where he said, "I can't do that. I don't have it in me". So his passion was not what my passion was, but he says when I talk when I bring him with me at talks, that hockey did show him that, if you work, you want to put into it, is the work that you are going to get out of it, and it showed him, and now he's going to school and some days he has long days, he's at the hospital, and he goes to work, and he goes to school, and he knows that if you show up, and you work, good things are going to happen, and that's exactly what I feel about it. He's now 28 and he's learned that at a much younger age than I did through hockey. I didn't learn that until the end of my career when it started winding down, and why did I get to play 19 years of professional hockey, and sometimes I'd play 10 games in two years or whatever, and why was that? I showed up every day. And I did show up every day. I barely rarely missed a practice because of illness or injury. I played through pain and I showed up. I think one of the reasons why my coach liked me so much and a lot of my coaches liked me, is because I did show up and I showed up to work. And he learned that at 20. And it took me until later to understand that, and I use it now at what I'm doing.

The process I've been working on is an education proposal with the north. Since I've got out of coaching, I've been working on, preferably when I travel when I work,

I've been focusing more and more time on it, knowing that it's become to the front at one point, and letting it take a life of its own, but showing up every day and working towards that point of success. So I learned that through sport. It might not happen tomorrow, but if you keep working, then it's going to happen.

I think honestly that my ability to be able to play hockey at a high level was beyond me. I played hockey to have fun and everything else came off my parents, the support, the punctuality, the ability to have skates, the sacrifices that they made for me. I mean, I made sacrifices too. I didn't go to parties. I didn't join in. I had to change friends.

The fact that my parents made, "I think the ability to give your kid the opportunity" to support them, is huge. Like, I understood the sacrifices that my parents made for me, even when I was younger. I was never given anything without the expectation that, I would work hard to achieve or prove to my parents I think that I deserve it. They just didn't save up for two weeks to buy me a hockey stick, and expect me to go out there and just fool around the ice. The expectation was that, if they are going to spend their hard earned money, then I'm going to give an effort, and I'm going to work hard, and I'm going to have fun at it, but I'm going to work hard. The point was always, if you are not going to work hard, then you are not going to achieve it. The biggest point that I would try and make, to have parents understand, that is, that there are sacrifices you have to make, to make sure that your children are successful. I don't care. It's true. Your kid is not going to be successful without parental support or without family support. It just doesn't happen. The kids have to know that, as much as they do it for themselves, they also do it for you. Secondly, for the kid, it's the hard work and it's their ability. There will always be people that won't help you, that will say you are not good enough,

you are not fast enough. I think hard work and showing up is the biggest one. There is going to be so many abilities and then so many distractions out there for everything. Find something you love, I don't care what it is, and you show up and work hard at it, you're going to be able to be successful at it.

Yeah, show up! Like there's going to be days when you don't want to be there. It happens to everybody's work. Just show up and put the effort in everyday, and never look back. You know will people always ask the age old question, "Would you ever change"? And they always say, "I am who I am today because of what I did". To a point, well I don't necessarily believe that. Sure there's things in life that you would change. There's decisions that you made that were absolutely ridiculous at a young age. And yeah, maybe they may have helped form who you are, but you would have been formed that way anyways, for the most part. You know I tell my kids when I talk to them, "You know, I made bad decisions like you made bad decisions. Everybody makes bad decisions and you come back from them and you learn from them, but yeah, I would change some bad decisions, and I would still be the person I am today because it's in you anyway". These kids today need to know that, don't let mistakes knock you down, because everybody makes them. Learn from those mistakes because you are going to make them, so learn and go on and be positive about it, and continue to work towards what you want, and that's hard work and that's showing up (John Chabot, interviewed March 2013).

Athlete 4: Gino Odjick

Gino is a 43 year old former professional hockey player who played left wing with the NHL from 1990 to 2002 and played 605 NHL games. Gino was born on September 7, 1970 in Kitigan Zibi, Quebec and is Algonquin First Nation. He was drafted in the 5th round in 1990 by

the Vancouver Canucks, and also played for the New York Islanders, the Philadelphia Flyers, and the Montreal Canadiens.

Gino Odjick's story:

I started skating when I was five years old. I was doing figure skating and my dad had played hockey at residential schools, and he had a passion for hockey. He figured the best way for me to learn how to skate was through figure skating at the beginning, and that was the first year, and the second year, I started to play hockey. I started playing hockey when I was six and my dad always told me this "Whether it be in life or in sport, the one question that you ask yourself every night before I go to bed is, 'Did I learn anything today?' and 'Did I improve today?' and 'How can I improve tomorrow?' and 'How can I better my performance?' A lot of it is through physical fitness and just trying to find balance in all of our actions. He told me that, a lot of things that athletes forget to do, are to continue to improve on their mental capabilities, right? To continuously improve and to get stronger and stronger, you need to have a strong mind. You need to occupy your mind and control your thoughts, because everything is interconnected; so we have to always try to find that balance and improve on it.

I think when you play sports, if you just lift weights and run and exercise, and practice your hockey, you're going to peak at some point but, if you find ways to continue to learn, then your strength never maxes out, you continue to learn and improve, and continue to get better, if you keep your learning and your mind involved.

Well what happened was, I was playing at home and my dad was coaching and we, myself and Clarence Jacko, he was living with us, and we played with Rapid Lake,

and there was a couple of us from Maniwaki, myself and Clarence, and the rest of the players were all from Rapid Lake. There was Monique Cote at the time too, and we used to travel all over the Province, and into Ontario to play. Once I got to, I was in grade 11 at the time, so it was either go play just for the fun, or go and try to make a career out of it, and to do that I had to move to Ottawa to play in Junior A. So that's what I did, I moved to Ottawa, and tried out with the Hawkesbury Hawks through one of my friends, and from there I just continued to improve and got better to the point where, when I was 18, I was going to make the decision, where I was going to play to entertain myself, and try to go to school, or I was going to try and make a career out of it. At that point, I decided that I wanted to make a career out of it.

At 18, I had decided, because in the summer time I always worked with my dad, whether we worked in the bush, logging or cutting hay for farmers, or you know, the jobs that you can do there. While I was doing that, my dad was helping me to get stronger and more fit. With hockey we were doing this work because it was manual labour. His plan was to work me up to 50, 60 hour weeks so that I hated doing it so much that I wanted to become a hockey player, it worked. He taught me that whether I was studying at school during the day, or doing manual labour after school or in the summer, that it was going to improve me in my hockey, right?

Because we grew up in Maniwaki, we, as athletes in Maniwaki, were way behind because in the city, kids had better training facilities, the coaches were better trained, and they were skating 12 months a year, right? Although I was a very good hockey player in Maniwaki, once I got to Juniors, I had to find the place where I would fit in. How, with my skill sets, and the way my body was built, how I was, can help the hockey team win. I

figured out, by helping my teammates, because I was a bigger guy, it didn't bother me that, because I helped my dad with manual labour, it didn't bother me to do that.

Well I think, after my first season in Hawkesbury in Junior A, the coach there told me, if I worked hard and I protected my teammates, and I was good in the dressing room in making my teammates feel comfortable, then he would find me a place to play Junior major, which is where all the players get drafted from so after the first season, although I didn't play that much, my coach there, Bob Hartley, who went on to win the Stanley Cup in Colorado as a coach, found me a team in Laval, near Montreal, and they drafted me that year, I think in the fifth round or the seventh round. Anyways they drafted me and once I got drafted to major Juniors, I knew that now it was up to me. If I wanted to train harder and put more time than anyone else, then I would have an opportunity to play in the NHL. Basically when I was 18, I knew that the opportunity was there.

Obviously my mom and my dad. They made a lot of sacrifices to give me an opportunity to play at an elite level. Hockey is extremely expensive and my dad, whether he would be in New York or Detroit, or anywhere working on high rises, he came home every weekend, he came to all the tournaments and provided me with hockey equipment, so they gave a lot of money, and all their time to put me in an environment where I could succeed, so definitely my parents. They always were my biggest supporters.

Barry Hicks, in Maniwaki, he was our school principal, he was my coach in peewee hockey and atom hockey. He really instilled the most important thing, "If you're going to succeed, is discipline, if you're going to succeed, discipline as a team player, and discipline for yourself. If you have no discipline, then you'll never win, or you'll never succeed". He was good. He pushed me hard and I thank him for that, that's for sure.

The biggest thing and the hardest thing was leaving Maniwaki. You know everyone there and then moving to the city. Ottawa wasn't too bad, because I had friends around, and there was people from Maniwaki, and we'd always hook up at different places, whether it would be at school, or at night. It doesn't matter where you go, whether it be Canada or the United States, it always seems that special powers that First Nations people have, that they find each other and they all go to the same place. But once I went to Montreal, it was a lot tougher, and it was a really big city, and you don't really know anyone, and our way of thinking in First Nations communities, and the way people think in a big city, is a whole new different world. That was the toughest, toughest thing I ever did, was leaving home. That was my biggest obstacle, and even now, I see it all the time with First Nations players. You see them with all sorts of skills and stuff, and they get homesick. At the end of the day, if you want to be the best you can be, and play in the NHL, you can't hang around the fort. I know it's comfortable around the fort, but that's not where greatness is. Well with what I did anyways.

The rituals for me was, first and foremost, I wanted to make all my teammates to feel good about themselves, and for them to realize how important they are for the team. The game itself, before I even play the game, I've already play the whole game in my mind. I know every shift, and where I'm going to be, and what I'm going to do, and what the guys that I'm playing with, what they're going to do and where they're going to place the puck, and the practices from the game before, you know, whether they pick up before, hit the puck around the board, it's to know before you get the puck, who you are going to pass it to. All those things, you know, even though you're going to get a rebound, and the goalie goes down, and you need to put it on the top shelf. When you get it you, shoot

it up and the goalie goes down, and you practice that, and you practice that. The shift in the games are all played in your mind before you play.

My proudest moment was, well they had a policy here in Vancouver, that once you got called up from the minors to play, they would fly your parents up. The Vancouver Canucks flew my dad out to Vancouver and I was able to score my first NHL goal. And I was really proud that I was able to do that with my dad there, because I knew that the commitment that he put in, and all the time that he put in, he was really at critical stages of my life, you know, as a teenager, you want to go out with your friends and stuff, and he forced me to continue to focus on sports.

My greatest game was probably the whole season in 93-94 where I scored 16 goals and 29 points, and where I really learned to put everything together, through the help of Pavel Bure and his dad, to learn the physical fitness aspect of it and nutrition. I was in the best shape of my life. I had the best year of my life on the ice. But to be totally honest, my last year that I played hockey in Montreal in 2002, that year, either if I'm a hockey player or myself, there's always one thing that your striving for, and it's to play that perfect game, and my role as an enforcer, that reason why I'm there, is so that my team is completely comfortable in doing with what they are doing, whether they are scoring goals or blocking shots or playing defensive hockey, to be completely comfortable. A big part of hockey is intimidation, where big players would hit your goal scorers, and stuff like that. That year in 2002, we played, I know that we played seven games, we went on a seven game road trip, and we achieved a perfect game. We were playing perfectly since day three. The whole team was playing at their best. There was balance in the group, there was unity in the group. It was incredible, having that feeling

of being an older guy and really helping the young guys, and the players feel comfortable and being a part of that, that was amazing. Because a lot of the work that is done, that gets people to play, gets a group to play perfectly, is done off the ice, in practices or after practices or before the games, talking to people and making everyone around you better than they ever thought they could be.

We had a sport psychologist later in my career. We didn't have one per say. I know I was lucky I went to St. Patrick's school. I had a teacher there, Mr. Brit, in grade one, he asked me what interested me at that time. He asked everyone in the class and he would get a book that interested us. You know, I was a heavy reader from grade one. Whatever I had a passion for, or whatever I liked at that time, I bought books and read them. The reason why I liked books is, it doesn't matter the environment and what's going on around you, you could pick up and read a book and all of a sudden now you're in that book, you're in that person's writing, in their world so I always liked to read about hockey, to have that opportunity, and a lot of times, to make our life or the night before the game, and you read, but a lot of the mental stuff, was taught to me by my dad. I remember I was probably six or seven years old, he brought me on this mountain during the day time, and it was about a four kilometre walk starting from the bottom of the mountain, to get to the other side of the mountain. He showed me the trails and everything. I remember it was a full moon night. He dropped me off at the bottom of the mountain and he said he would pick me up at the other side. It was dark and everything. I didn't know why he wanted me to do it, but he said to do it, so I went and walked up fast. It was completely dark and I walked the four kilometres to the other side, and he picked me up and I asked him, "Why did you make me do that dad?" and he goes "I want you to

get used to things you are not comfortable with, because the more you do it, the more you'll feel comfortable, and you'll raise your fear factor. Because a lot of people waste a lot of energy worrying about things and being scared about things, and you won't waste your energy ever being worried about things. You'll start it and go ahead and do it, and the more you do it, the more you'll become comfortable with it". So the third or fourth time he made me walk across that mountain, I was completely free of fear.

What I used to get involved in the game, was just the sounds of the game. So whatever to start, to warm-up before the game, I'd always get the rope and make sure to fill myself up with lots of food and water, and I'd skip the rope to get my feet moving and to get my body loose, and then once I'd go on with the warm-up, I'd just focus on the sounds of the pucks hitting the board, or hitting one stick to the other, and then having a good read on how players react, and what they're going to do, or who's the guy that shot the puck all the time, and making sure it goes to the net, where the puck would go next, right? In hockey, I was always thinking three or four plays ahead of time and where the puck would go, by the time I would get there, where would it be. I would set that up so that the puck comes to you, once you get into the offensive zone, and like I'm a left-handed shot, and if I passed it over to a guy that was a right-handed shot, or I know that he would make a play on his strong side, and then the next play over, would go to the other side of the ice, then it would come to me by the time we were in front of the goalie, so a lot of it is just preparing and knowing your teammates, and knowing where the puck will go, and how the other teams defence is played. At the end of the day everything is preparation, and thinking about the things when you do it. That's what you get out of it, you feel good and helping them out in any way you can, and creating a good

environment, and subconsciously, the guys will pass the puck over to you. It feels good right, there's good energy right where you're at. When you create that sort of environment, then the guys still, they pass the puck where its good and they don't pass it where they don't feel comfortable.

Well the thing is, that's something that when you become an elite athlete, you have to be, I don't know if you can call it selfish, but when we played here, I stayed with a family in Vancouver, and then I stayed with a family in Montreal when I played Juniors, I stayed with a family and whether it be my own family, they know that the only thing I think about is hockey, and you're always looking for continual improvement every day, so your 100% focused on what you have to do, so you don't have time to cook or clean, because you're always working, you're practicing, you're getting in better shape, and then you have to sleep and then you eat properly again and play the game and then sleep some more. So near the beginning there's distractions and I think sometimes that we get distracted either as an athlete or especially when you're young, its relationships, love relationship between yourself and whoever you're seeing, and sometimes you can get distracted by that. You have to learn how to deal with that, or be in a relationship with someone, who completely understands that, you know, on game day, or the day before, that you can't give too much of yourself because you have to save all that energy.

When I started my career, there were two things I said to myself, I said, "I don't want to play past my prime to just play for a living", and "How much money I needed to retire, to live comfortably so my lifestyle wouldn't change", and then I wanted to make sure when I retired, that I wanted to find ways to create that opportunity, and to create wealth for First Nations people, and as soon as I retired, I bought the golf course in

Musqueam, and invested in First Nations businesses, and now any partnerships that I do, is always for the same reason, and that's my focus to create employment and wealth for First Nations people, and to create those opportunities where there's employment because I just seen the difference it makes in the whole family, when somebody's working 40 hours a week, and to have that opportunity to provide for their family, and I seen that at the golf course where some people that came and worked for us who had drinking problems or addiction problems, and just to see now the whole change in their life where they had a reason to get up in the morning.

The importance of team work, the importance of creating a good environment, and I realized that, "What you put into something is what you're going to get out of it". The biggest thing that I learned after sport is this, the way you perceive yourself, is the way you project or protect yourself. It's what you think in your mind and your thoughts and how you project yourself, and that will give you the results that you're going to get. That's why if I'm going to school and talking to the young people, I tell them, "Think and know that you're the greatest at what you're doing. If you find something and you love doing it, and you have a passion for it and get paid, that's what you're going to become. You're going to become the greatest at what you're doing and you're going to excel". I tell myself this all the time. There's no limits in this world. The only limits there is, are the ones that you impose on yourself. Your successes or failures at the end of day are because you're focused on what you're doing, or the lack of focus on what you're doing. That's the one thing as an athlete or a person that I learned, that what you're doing at that moment, is what you're doing.

Well there's days, remember I was telling you that everything goes into flow.

There's going to be games where nothing goes right. Know that there's nothing you can do that day, it's not going to change that day. You just got to try to live it that day, and then when that day is over, get prepared for the next. Just live it, right? And you go home and think it over, and you get up the next morning and you have a good workout, and then endorphins start to kick in, and you feel good about yourself. Here we go, let's go! Where people get into trouble, whether its sports or in business, they carry that over with them. Well you can't let that happen. It's done and over. Just make sure here, that we don't make the same mistakes. The harder you work, the more that you think properly. You do things for the right reason, and with a good heart, things are always going to work out for you.

You think properly and you learn from your mistakes, and you improve on them, and you don't dwell on that, and things are going to go well. You're doing it for the right reasons and second of all, you're doing the right things to achieve your success. You're always doing things so there is no doubt, right? As an athlete, I want to be as fit as humanly possible. I want to be hydrated and I want to be flexible, and then I want to create a good environment, and when you do that, good things happen all the time. And the really, really important thing is your environment. You put yourself in a great environment where everyone has the same goals as you do. You surround yourself with people who have a passion to succeed. And it doesn't matter, like when me and Pavel, we were playing here in Vancouver, and we used to train at UBC and then we met some professors, and then we met some business people, and then once every two weeks, we'd all get together. There was a room at UBC that was made available to us, and we'd all chat about our experiences and mindsets, and everyone there improved. We were all

doing different things. We were all just looking for improvement, it was just something that we did. As far as I knew, no one else was doing it. There's so much that you can learn from surrounding yourself in a good environment.

Physical fitness and focus, complete focus, you need to know what you're doing. The most important thing of it all is to think properly. You never feel inferior to anyone, and have a good strong heart and do everything you're doing with integrity. Because if you're not working as hard as you can, or if you're trying to take shortcuts, you'll know that, right? Be yourself and think great, and that's what you're going to become. There were times when I was thinking I was great, before I even knew I was great.

I think if there's anything I could tell, whether it be in sport or business, don't worry about anything. If you're looking to the answers for something, you just tell yourself, your subconscious mind, "Can you give me the answer to this problem in seven days?" and I guarantee you, if you tell yourself "Don't worry about it" your subconscious mind will do all the work for you. And you'll get a better result or at least the same result, than the people who worried about it for seven days. There is so much power that we have as humans that we don't fully understand yet (Gino Odjick, interviewed April 2013).

Athlete 5: Jordin Tootoo

Jordin Tootoo is a 30 year old professional hockey player currently playing right wing for the Detroit Red Wings in the NHL. He is from Rankin Inlet, Nunavut and was born on February 2, 1983. He is the first Inuit to play in the NHL and was drafted in 2001 by the Nashville Predators, and played there until he signed on with the Red Wings on July 1, 2012.

Jordin Tootoo's story:

My father Barney Tootoo was a hockey player so hockey was always in the family. I probably put on a pair of skates at the age of three years old and started playing hockey around the age of five and played all of my minor hockey in Rankin Inlet up until 14 years old, then I moved down south at Fort Providence, Northwest Territories, which is a city outside of Yellowknife and played a half a year there, then I went on to a couple of Aboriginal tournaments in Alberta, and when I was 14, I played triple A Bantam in Spruce Grove, Alberta. Then at 15, I played Junior A in The Pas, Manitoba with the OCN Blizzards. Fortunately, I was able to play one year with my brother Terrance who since passed on. Then from 16 to 19, I played in Brandon, Manitoba for the Western Hockey League for the Wheat Kings. Then at the age of 20, I turned professional and that's when I started my NHL career with the Nashville Predators. I played there for 9 years and now I'm in Detroit.

When you're a young hockey player, you always dream of playing in the NHL. For a kid from way up north in the high Arctic in Nunavut, those goals are pretty far stretched for any young kid. We're very isolated and we don't have very many scouts up there, but you know, I had the opportunity to play on a hockey team down south, the Western Hockey League, it's kind of like a stepping stone to becoming a pro athlete, and got scouted.

I think when I was 19 years old, it really dawned on me that I could play in the NHL and you know the first step is getting drafted, and I got drafted in the fourth round and 98th overall, and that's kind of your opportunity and that's when you know you have an opportunity to play, and I think the hardest part is, once your there in the NHL, it's even harder to stay in the NHL.

My mom and dad believing in me and giving me every opportunity to play the best hockey there is, and for them to let me leave Rankin Inlet at such a young age to pursue my goal, and them letting me go. Also the community of Rankin Inlet, with their tremendous support, and you know with their encouragement, it gave me that much more drive.

When you put all your time and effort into one basket, for me that was wanting to make the NHL, you know like I said, the first step is getting drafted then after that it becomes more difficult. You got to make sure you train to do your best of your own ability and it's an everyday thing. You can't just train two or three days out of the week and expect to play with the best in the world. It's a seven day job for me and in the off-season, I'm training five days a week and preparing myself to be the best that I can.

Not every game is going to be perfect. Part of that is being mentally focused and when you have a bad game you have to put it behind you, and have to work on those little things that created those problems, and you want to fix them because you don't want it happening again, so it's about practicing, making yourself, giving yourself every opportunity to be better for the next day.

In games, things happen so quickly and you know it's a game of inches, and there are going to be errors out there, it's just that you want to limit those errors, and make sure that you have support from your line mates, and what I think the best way to put it is, that you work on those little things in practice so it doesn't happen and if it does happen, it's instinct for you.

When you become an NHL player there is a lot of distractions and we have the right people around us to cope with these issues, and at the end of the day, you know, it's

about you performing and you got to give yourself the opportunity to be the best you can, and you know mentally you kind of got to block everything out and worry about what's best for you.

You get pulled in a lot of different directions and you know at the end of the day it's about being grounded, being true to yourself. For me, it's not, every hockey player dreams of playing in the NHL you know, only a selected few get that opportunity and when that opportunity arrives, you got to make sure that you make the best of it, but like I said, it's tough staying in the NHL, because there is so many more other hockey players that want to be in your spot, and every year you got to make sure that you're in the best shape possible, and you know, I've made a lot of great friends. I got a lot people in the hockey world and it's brought me places that I never imagined.

You know, that opportunity doesn't come along a lot, but obviously in the NHL, it's so hard to score a goal, but every time I score, it's very gratifying, it just, you're like a little kid when you're playing minor hockey. You score goals and get all excited and I think that's the best part of being involved in a team, and when everyone really appreciates your efforts and what not and you get rewarded, at the end of day, that's probably the best feeling any hockey player could have.

I think for any Aboriginal kid making it to a pro level is very, very hard. We're faced with a lot of adversity being Native. You know people are always wanting to find an obstacle to make you break, and for me, it was the driving force. It gave me more fuel in your engine to prove people wrong. You know, I'm not the biggest guy. I play with a lot of heart and emotion and you know, when you grow up in a harsh environments, I think for me it made me mentally very strong and, you know, being able to overcome a

lot of obstacles, you know, that's what drives me every day and helps me, you know, wanting to be a better professional, both on and off the ice.

For any Aboriginal athlete or what not, you're getting a stamp on you, and when people know you're Native, there's a lot of obstacles you have to overcome, and for me you know, as Natives we're prone to a lot of, I mean, getting pulled in a lot of different directions, and for me it was having the ability to overcome these difficulties, and I couldn't do it without the support of my family, my close friends that encourage me every day to keep moving on, and taking it one day at a time.

In a lot of northern communities you don't get the same exposure as the southern kids do. I think it's about exploring and getting out, and venturing into different territories into different parts of the world, to give you a better understanding of how the world works, and having seeing different cultures and what not, is always a good thing to have. A lot of young First Nation and Aboriginal kids, they become so used to their environment that when they leave it's uncomfortable for them, and that's the part where we got to educate the kids, that everything in life isn't going to come easy. It's about teaching adversity and moving on to the next challenge.

I think it's about your support system. A lot of kids, you know, adolescents and young adults, when you surround yourself around good quality people, good things are going to happen. In this world, there is a lot of distraction and it's about how you handle those distractions, and I think it's about being selfish at some point, about doing what's best for you. You may have friends that pull you in a certain way, and you feel a different. I know it's about having a level head, and doing what's best for you.

I've played a lot of hockey over the years and I guess the most memorable

performance individually was probably when I played juniors. I think I scored four goals and a couple of assists and I think, like I said there's so many stories and I could go on and on, but that one really sticks.

Things are great. You know, I'm doing what I love every day and that's playing hockey, and you know, you couldn't ask for anything more when you get to wake up every day and be excited to go to work, it's fun and we're like little kids in the candy store when we get in the arena, except that we're all adults and you know you see guys that play in the league for 10 to 15 years, and we're all like little kids in there, you know it's fun. At the end of the day, it's about enjoying your time and making a lot of new friends, and every year, you know, each team is different and you meet new guys and at the end of the day, you become brothers and you become banded, and that's what makes you successful when everyone's on the same page.

Be true to yourself - there's nothing more satisfying than being true to yourself, and when you have opportunities lying ahead of you, it's about taking it one step at a time. You know, life ain't easy and it's about having fun through good times and bad times, and when you have great people around you, you know, anything is possible (Jordin Tootoo, interviewed, April 2013).

Athlete 6: Billy Mills

Billy Mills is a gold medal Olympian from the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. He was born on June 30, 1938. He won a gold medal in the 10,000 metre run at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. He was the first American to win gold in the 10,000 metre run and the second Native American, the first was Jim Thorpe, to win gold. He is a former United States marine and is a member of the Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribe. He was inducted in the US National

Track and Field hall of fame in 1976 and was inducted in the US Olympic hall of fame in 1984. In 1983, Billy's story was told in the movie, *Running Brave*. In 2012, President Obama awarded Billy the President Citizens Medal because of his work with the Running Strong for American Indian Youth organization.

Billy Mills Story:

I started participating in sport, in my sport of track and field, when I entered high school at the Haskell Indian School at Lawrence, Kansas, it was a residential school. I got involved, simply because, when I was a young boy, my dad died when I was 12 years old. My dad would tell me that I had broken wings and he would say “I’ll share some things with you and if you follow them, someday you’ll have wings of angel”. My dad would also tell me, “You need to dream to heal a broken soul”, and “It’s the pursuit of the dream that heals you”, and he would tell me that he wanted me involved in sports, or music, or drama. Anything constructed for the joy-able, the arts for example. I thought he meant for me to be an athlete. I tried rodeo, I tried boxing, I tried a number of sports which I was not very good at. I went to Haskell Indian School and, as a freshman, I wanted to be involved in some form of activity, whether it be sports, music, the arts, or drama, whatever it might be, and in almost the same words that my dad would speak to me, and I thought, my gosh that’s the Creator. They sent this man to me. So with track, distance running, in my freshman year, I didn’t make the team but I would remember my dad saying, “Billy, it’s not the destination that empowers you”. I went with that over the summer and ran almost every day. I came back to school my sophomore year and I started running cross country, and I was undefeated for the rest of high school in cross country.

I started at age 15, I started competitive running at age 15, however growing up as child, I was also conditioning myself towards, and became in a sense, without even knowing it. We didn't have a car, so I biked and to go swimming, being a 10, 11, 12, 13 year old boy, to go swimming, we would bike one way 15 miles, then we would swim across the lake, which was a half a mile, then we'd play in the cherry trees, and smudge trees on the other side of the lake. We'd play there for about an hour, hour and a half. We'd then swim a half mile back across the lake. Then bike 15 miles back home. So just to play over the summer months, I was getting in a mile of swimming and 30 miles of biking, having no idea that this was turning into an investment conditioning to be world elite athlete.

When I graduated from high school, I had no idea that, how you make, how my world was becoming. I had 16 full athletic scholarships offered to me and I thought, every athlete had an athletic scholarship offered. I chose the University of Kansas simply because they were one of the powerhouses in track and field in the United States, and they had a quality coach, and also it was only a mile from Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. I felt it wouldn't be much of a transition for me so I attended the University of Kansas. However I was not aware of how I would be treated in a predominantly white world. Although Haskell was in Lawrence Kansas, I went to school with a thousand other Indian people from First Nations people, you would say, from about 32 different tribes, so I very comfortable in my environment. When I started the University of Kansas, I became angry toward the residential school because, as quality as they were for me, I had nothing but praise and positiveness with my experience going to the residential school, the negative was that nobody prepared me for

how I would be treated once I left the Native American environment, the racism I would encounter. By that I mean, I would win the state track meet in high school and I would be invited to the Kiwanis club, the Rotary club, the various business clubs in community of Lawrence, and they would honour me. But once I left that Haskell environment and started at KU, I ran into another concept of community which was not in Lawrence, KS, it was in America, and it was the racial component once I left my little environment of Haskell, and it was a shock to where one day I'm being honoured, to the next day I'm being treated with racial tones, but again I make it very clear that, if you use this concept I want you to make it very clear, it was not the University of Kansas, it was America and that's what society needs to understand. It's easy for society to say there was racism at the University of Kansas but no, I experienced racism in the United States of America. Some of my fondest memories were going to the University of Kansas, and I found people there that helped me ultimately deal with racism that America was dealing with as a whole.

By the time I was a sophomore in high school, I wanted to be the first man in the world to break four minutes...I go to school to get two hours of work and then class started. I opened up a newspaper and it said "Banister shatters the four minute barrier", and the first goal I wanted, was taken away from me. I chose then to never try to break four minutes in a mile. I probably was a 3:55 to a 3:57 four minute miler. Once I hear Bannister broke four, I had no desire to break the mile record. But then I wanted to, during my sophomore year, I wanted to make the Olympic team. I didn't exactly know what it meant. My junior year in college, society broke me and I came so close to suicide, and I was on the verge of jumping from the fourth floor but I heard someone say

“Don’t”. It was underneath my skin and it was my dad’s voice that I heard. So I thought the Creator sent my dad’s voice to me. Then I remember my dad telling me, “You needed a dream, pursuit of a broken soul”, so I wrote down “Gold medal ten thousand meter run”. So my junior year in college, I starting focusing on wanting to make the Olympic team and winning the 10,000 meter run.

I started believing that I could be one of the best during my sophomore year in high school. Actually I don’t know how people will understand this but when I ran in high school I didn’t want any... I wanted to win, and I didn’t want any of the white guys to beat me. After my third race, cross country in high school, no white guy could beat me. My teammate, a Mohawk guy from New York, he would beat me on occasion in track running the mile, but I won two straight championships, and the worst I ever did in track was second, so from that point on, my sophomore year on, I would try to compare myself with the best high school students in the United States. Then I was trying to become one of the best. I meet very few young people today, Indigenous or non-Indigenous people, who are sophomores who have that concept of trying to compare themselves against the very best in the country. In my sophomore year, I was trying to compare, “How do I stand against the very best in the United States”, and that just went with me. So eventually I wanted to be the very best in the world. By the time I was a senior in college, I won a gold medal at the Olympic games and I wanted a world record. My thought was, you get a world record then you’re the best in the world. You win an Olympic gold medal, you won the most important race in the world.

My dad, although he died when I was 12, I grew to idolize him but I knew my dad was not a good husband. I’m assuming he was a good father to my older brothers and

sisters and I know my eldest brother has conflict with my image I have with my father, but I think that, by the time I came along, my dad was thinking redemption. I think he was saving himself for life here after. I think I was the only one in my family who would pray with my dad. He would go to the Catholic Church and attend every serving mass. He would go into confession. He would be in there for hours, not really, but he would be in there for a really long time, and then I would go in, and I would try and think of sins as a nine year old, 10 year old boy, almost lying to have a sin. As long as my dad was in there, I'd come out of the confession booth, and then we would pray together. He would take the Christian view, and he would parallel it with traditional Lakota, I thought to try to help me find my place in the world. For example, the passage I read, and I don't know where I read it but it said "Perhaps Indigenous people are more ahead of us spiritually, because when they say they were born from the side of the mountain, or they came from mother Earth, perhaps they were talking about their spiritual birth", but it says "Jesus Christ was born, he came from his mother's womb. He grew into adulthood. He was crucified, died and was buried, rose again from the dead, spiritually coming from Mother Earth, coming from the side of the mountain, coming from the tomb". And the Lakota, when I was growing up, would say "We came from the side of a mountain, we came from a cave", so my dad would find parallel's on how I could become comfortable in a predominantly European American world, and still hold true to my Native American culture. So my dad by far the number one. And my wife became very instrumental to me. She was the first person I truly, truly trusted that I could open up my soul with and share my soul with her. My brothers and sisters, after we were orphaned, have always been there for me. They've always been a support system for me,

the older and the younger. So I've got to include them but, primarily my dad, my wife then my brothers and sisters, going to be in the foundation, then my coach I had when I graduated from college, and started training for the Olympic team, as a marine corp officer who happened to be Canadian, Tommy Thomson Sr., who won a gold medal in the high hurdles in the 1920's representing Canada. He became deaf, coached at the US naval academy for 30 years, 28 of those years he was totally deaf. He was the first white man I ever trusted, and I opened up my soul to him. He said, "I could help you. You have the ability to make the Olympic team, it's your ability that's going to get you there, but I could be a mentor. I could help you get there". I learned the word mentor from my father so when Tommy Thomson Sr. said "I could be your mentor", once again I was like my God, the Creator is sending this man to me. I trusted him and he helped me get a world record, he helped me get seven American records and the helped me get the Gold medal.

I would say being hypoglycemic, type two diabetic, back then they called it border line diabetic. I had to keep from having low blood sugar. I didn't know what low blood sugar was, and the medical profession did not have the knowledge to help me. One day I would be an emerging elite world class, the next day I'd be struggling to finish a race. And the media and coaches made it racial, and made it economic, and social. They would say low self-esteem. You're orphaned. You're a minority. You live in poverty. You got to learn to deal with those issues. You're mentally falling apart. But I knew I didn't have low self- esteem. I knew I had this passion and this drive to win a gold medal at the Olympic games, but the only people who had the same drive and same passion as me were already gold medalists. So I felt like I was in this elite world with

the passion to pursue excellence to do the ultimate. But I was physically falling apart. One year before the Olympic games, I was given a glucose tolerance test by a Navy doctor. He diagnosed me as hypoglycemic and borderline diabetic, but no knowledge of how to treat it, and all he said was go on a high protein diet. It would level out the process of everything breaking down into glucose at a slower pace. So I did that, and fortunately it was enough. I controlled it properly, to where I wouldn't go low blood sugar, and almost overnight, I went from being a potential, to world class, to elite.

It was not to be elite, but it all led to being elite. It was to feel complete as a human being, and I came so close to suicide, and I knew I needed to heal a broken soul. So how did I heal a broken soul and this is most powerful to me, but it would not be, to be an elite athlete. How do you heal a broken soul? I went back into our Native American culture, our tradition, our spirituality, and I took the virtues and the values that empowered the culture, that empowered the tradition, that empowered the spirituality, and I transferred virtues and values into a current day pursuit, and current day dream, to try to make the Olympic team, to try to win a gold medal, to try and win a world record. But overall, I picked the virtues and the values, and put them into me, to try and heal a broken soul. And what I say today, that young people pick the culture, take the tradition, take the spirituality, and the virtues and values that empowered me, and transfer virtues and values into a current day economic or educational pursuit, and they'll become warriors of the 21st century. And when I say virtues and values, I'll give you an example. I took bravery and fortitude. My dad would say the far most powerful of a Lakota people, but there are seven of them, and he would say the far most important were bravery and fortitude and wisdom and generosity. So here's how to use them. I

decided to pick bravery and fortitude. I decided to go on a journey to the centre of my soul and that's where you find the virtue of wisdom. You use the virtue of wisdom to make the right choices for yourself. The right choices empower you. As you become empowered, you go to the virtue of generosity and you help empower others. So, on a daily basis I would do that in my life, trying to make the right choices to heal a broken soul, and that led me into multitudes of directions. I had to understand what they meant by sovereignty. So I had a very quality understanding of tribal sovereignty, and an understanding of tribal sovereignty made me well aware of what made me different as an American citizen, but that difference empowered me, just the understanding of the sovereignty of the Lakota Nation, the treaties, and how the treaties have been broken, etc. Then I was able to take the virtues and values into our culture and put them into a current day pursuit to find happiness within myself. And I had to address sovereignty, I had to address broken treaties, I had to address racism, but I addressed it on a very positive intellectual level to prepare myself where I can communicate, debate, and educate society rather than being angry and withdrawn, and as I started doing that, I realized this incredible power within me, that was healing a broken soul and as I healed, I can make better choices on how to deal with hypoglycemia, type two diabetes, and by making better choices there, that led to me to empower myself as an athlete, so I can truly pursue this less significant goal of trying to win a gold medal at the Olympic games.

The only pre-race ritual, in a sense, is that I had to have my warm-ups folded up in a certain way. I had to fold them up to where I felt complete. I couldn't just put them in a basket, but I would do that, and give them to somebody, and once someone took

them, they could throw them in a basket, but mainly I just would tell myself many, many times, that I've been preparing now for x number of months, I'm not sick today, I'm as ready as I'll ever be, so at the height of competition, it's not time for me to compete against my competitors, but to reach within the depths of my capabilities, to compete against myself, to the greatest extent that I'm capable of today, and that was victory. Just taking pressure off of myself, because if all I have to compete against is myself, to the greatest extent that I'm capable of, and if I could do that, whether if I'm first or last, it's victory. That, take that, knowing that I could do that, and if I could beat you while I'm competing against myself, you're not going to break me, because I'm not competing against you, I'm competing against me, as I try to beat you. I don't know if that makes sense because, you would think, well you're still competing against me. But I'm competing against myself, trying to get the most out of me, so my racing is a little faster than your racing. The ritual, if I took off my warm ups and throw them in a basket, I was going to run a horrible race. But if I took them off and folded them up and handed them to someone else, and they threw them in a basket, then it was fine. I had to, it was the final thing of preparation.

I would have say the gold medal at the Olympic games, simply because I pursued the gold medal to heal a broken soul. And I had to heal the soul before I could really position myself to try and win the gold medal, but I went, I was going low blood sugar during the race and with 300 metres to go, Clarke pushed me, but we were bumping each other and nobody was at fault, and when he pushed me he was not at fault, because we were bumping one another. I stumbled. Gammoudi of Tunisia saw an opportunity to strike because I stumbled into the third lane, Clarke was in lane one and he took off in

lane two. I recovered and closed on Clarke's shoulder and cut Gammoudi off, not intentionally and not enough to create a foul. Gammoudi twisted his body, broke between Clarke and I, pushed Clarke and me, again not intentionally, and didn't create a foul, and my low blood sugar was almost ready to destroy me, but I decided to maybe get 10 yards out of me. I make one final try coming off the final curve. There's like maybe 80,000 people cheering, screaming, and I hear nothing, but I get them heart beats going boom boom boom, I could feel it like it's ready to come out of my chest, it was just pounding, and a tingling sensation in my forearm, but in my mind, it was so fast and so clear. I got to go now, 120 meters to go, I got to go now, and I knew my wife was just 32 seats up, and there's 100 meters to go until the finish line, and I'd previously had said that I was going to make one final effort, not because she was sitting there, but because it was just a good place to make one final effort at the final curve. I get to that point and my legs aren't responding. I'm going low blood sugar, you just totally run out of energy if you're hypoglycemic, and I'm in third place. I'm in lane four, Clarke is in lane three, he's in second place, and Gammoudi is in lane two, and he's in first place. Lane one has runners who we were lapping, and a lapped runner as Clarke and Gammoudi go by, cuts across the track to get in front of me, and I thought he was going to stop in lane four, I momentarily panicked. How do I get by him? I can't go around because lane one's all full. I'd have to go out into lane five and six. That runner moved on into the fifth lane, and let me go by, as I went by him, I looked and in the centre of his singlet, was an eagle and it was back to my dad as a little boy, "You do these things son, someday you'll have wings of an eagle". I saw the eagle on his singlet, and it was wings of an eagle. "I can win, I can win, I can win." My mind just went so powerfully back to my

dad, wings of an eagle, "I can win, I can win, I can win". With 30 meters left to go, I'm still about three yards behind in lane four. My thoughts, if I could see my face as it stretched across the finish line, my thoughts became, I may never be this close again, I got to do it now, wings of an eagle. "I won! I won! I won!" I felt it across my chest. I had to find the athlete that had the eagle on his singlet to tell him his eagle helped me win. I found him and there was no eagle! So it was just a perception. I had to have been thinking of my dad. It might have been a German runner. Why? Because I realized as I saw the German warm-ups, they all had an eagle on the back of their warm-ups. I saw the German warm-up, thought about that eagle, subconsciously I drew it out of me when I needed it.

See the gold medal win is by far the best performance. My training involved a very strong, Native American philosophical approach. I wouldn't do one thing that would distract from an emotional, psychological, or spiritual build up for two years. In my post Olympic journey I turned down, not a lot of money, but over 4 million of endorsements that all would have been alcoholic related simply because I chose, with all of the alcoholism in the Native American world, that I would not, in any way, involve alcohol in any way, in my training for example, or as an adult now, I probably in a year's time, would have maybe nine or 10 ounces a year in alcohol. My wife and I were in Europe or Paris, and she says, "Take a little sip of this wine", so I'll take like a tongue sip of wine, but I've just chosen not to include that in my life. So I would see things that I thought were destroying Native Americans as a whole, and I would chose not to participate.

Right now my life is two-fold. My wife gave up her passion of art, to be my

support system, to pursue my dream, and in many ways, to be my support system to heal a broken soul. We've had a beautiful journey through sport, and my focus now is to be her support system, as she goes back to her passion, goes back to her dream. She's an artist, and currently, at this point, she's approaching the Panama Canal. She teaches art on the Crystal Cruise line and is going to 160 countries. She's going to, approaching 90 countries, twofold through my sports world and through her world of art around the world on the Crystal Cruise Line, so my focus is supporting her art world, and that's probably one of the most beautiful closures through my sport worlds to be in her, supporting her passion. So, one is my wife at this point in her journey, and then the other is just trying to be the best grandfather I can be, and trying to instill the virtues and values of our culture in our 12 grandchildren.

I learned it's the journey, not the destination that empowers us. It's the fifty close to sixty thousand miles of training, not breaking the tape at the Olympic games, that empowered me as an athlete. It's the daily decisions you make as you pursue your Master's degree, not getting the diploma, that empowers you as an educated person. It's the journey, not the destination that empowers us. It's the daily decisions that we make in life, not just the telling we possess, that choreographs our destiny, and now after traveling to 106 different countries, I found global unity through the dignity, through the character, through the beauty of global diversity, and not only to me, but at the end of the Olympic games, but far more important to the future of humankind. So the three things I took from sport that I can apply to life, one, it's the journey not the destination that empowers us. Number two, it's the daily decisions we make in life, not just the telling we possess that choreographs our destiny. Number three, I took three things of

global diversity, the dignity, the character and the beauty through diversity, not only through me at the Olympic games. Far more important is the future of humankind.

I think my first advice would be to utilize sport as a catalyst. If you utilize sport as a catalyst, you're preparing a journey that you can transfer out of sport into other pursuits, other interests, other passions, other educational pursuits, and you're educating yourself for an adult life. Too many of our young people might win a state championship in a small state, very heavily populated, and they don't look beyond that state championship, to see how they would compare themselves nationally across the United States. We make a mistake by treating them like these great athletes, and I say this with a lot of compassion, where in reality, when somebody wins the state in North Dakota for example, they might not make the high school team in Sacramento.

I would challenge our young people to read. We need to read. I was a very astute athlete. I studied the sport worldwide. I studied the sport worldwide as a sophomore in high school. You don't find any of our athletes doing that. And why did I do it? Because I loved to read and I would read about different coaches worldwide, and I would read about runners worldwide. And I was comparing myself with these athletes on a global basis in my sophomore, junior, and senior year in high school, and why did I do that? Simply because I like to read, and so many of our young people who don't read and who don't have access to libraries, they have these great minds that will wake up these minds. Reading can provide such an incredible insight (Billy Mills, Interviewed May 2013).

Athlete 7: Waneek Horn-Miller

Waneek is a retired women's water polo player who played for the Canadian Women's

National Water Polo team and won gold at the 1999 Pan Am Games. She was co-captain of the Women's National Water Polo team during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Waneek is a Mohawk from Kahnawake, Quebec and was born on November 30, 1975. She started playing water polo when she was 14 years old.

Waneek Horn-Miller's story:

I've been participating since I was I guess a small, I was five years old. My mother put us in sports because we were really hyperactive kids and she wanted, like my mother was older having children, she was 31, I was born when she was 36 and she grew up in a house that didn't have the best role models. She did a lot of reading and wanted to give her daughters the best opportunities for success. She knew they had to learn a certain skill set, like perseverance and how to take care of themselves, how to respect others, how to achieve, and all these things. She found that she could do that through sport, so she chose competitive swimming and competitive running which were sports that, they weren't judged sport as she didn't want us to be, like gymnastics or figure skating or even team sports as young kids, because like she was worried that our Native, our difference, would come into play. If it was just us against the sport, we had some control over them. Me and my sisters were all put into competitive swimming and competitive running.

I was a competitive swimmer for six years and I had made, when I was like 11, 12, I was Ontario Champion and stuff like that for swimming and made international, national times (and stuff like that). By the time I was 13, I was getting bored with swimming, and by the time I got into high school, I discovered water polo. So that's how it went. I started in grade nine. My oldest sister, Justso, who is now a medical doctor, she was on the water polo team at our high school so she was in grade 13 and I was in grade

nine, and she got me to come out in play and I really loved it. By that time, I wanted to be in a team sport and I wanted to have some social aspect to it, so I started playing. When I was about 18, no 17, I made the junior National team of Canada and then when I was 18, I made the senior National team of Canada and then when I was 24, I went to the Olympics, and then when I was 27, I was kicked off the National team.

Ever since I heard of the Olympics, ever since I was a kid, the first time I heard of the Olympics, I was about seven, eight years old and it was when Alwyn Morris was competing in the 84 Olympic games and also when the movie "Running Brave", which was about Billy Mills winning gold in Tokyo. My mom made sure I witnessed, actually I remember watching on TV, Alwyn win gold, and then I remember seeing the movie and thinking, "That's what I want". It was something that was a potential reality because my mom said I was already showing signs, I had the physical talents to do it.

Definitely my mom, and my sisters. Everything was always a team effort and you know, I had support from other people. I had support from Alwyn, but that was later on, later in my career when I was already on the National team. Early on, it was definitely my mother, it was definitely her and just my older sisters being good role models because I remember them being really accomplished. One is a medical doctor and the other one has her PHD. They were both athletes. And they're both mothers. One has six kids and one has four kids. They took what they learned from sport and they applied it to different areas. And then my little sister who is an actor, she has taken what she learned in sport and applied it to her field, which she's doing really well in.

There's a lot of preconceived notions about Native people and, in the athletic world, that I faced early on, because I chose sports, especially competitive swimming,

where there were not really that many Native people doing it. So that for a lot of people, I was the first Native person they've ever met in the flesh, and just a lot of things that were racist attitudes towards athletes, that we were gifted, very talented athletes but we were lazy, that we were queers, that we were hard to coach, you know, all these things, and it was hard hearing that. And I heard that from parents, from other athletes, and I heard that as young as eight, nine years old. And that's why having my mother there, kind of counter-balanced that. She really made sure that she showed me success stories, such as Alwyn and Billy, and the Firth sisters, and Angel Tomers, and all these athletes. She made sure that I knew who they were, and knew that we aren't quitters, and that there are very accomplished Native athletes out there. But it was hard, because it sticks with you. It sticks with you very much so, and I think, from you know, I started my athletic career in Ottawa, but coming back home to my community, a lot of the lateral violence, a lot of that stuff as I got older about being, "Oh Native girls don't lift weights. Native girls should have long hair. You know, you're acting white". All the criticisms that you get and sometimes you get them from people that are very close to you. It's really, really hard. It's hard because these are people that you don't expect that from, you know. But also, on the flipside, I had a lot of people that were supportive as well. I had both. You know, and then there's going through the Oka Crisis, and going through a very traumatic experience at a young age. I suffered from post traumatic stress disorder afterwards, and not knowing what to do with that. Not knowing how to deal with that, that really impacted my athletic career because it was kind of like a self medication strategy.

It was good but it didn't deal with a lot of the underlying issues. And then there was racism, there was always, you know, because at the elite level of sport, there's not

that many Native athletes there either and I'm not exactly a wall flower. I'm very outspoken and I'm very proud of who I am. It was hard because I never really fit into the elite sport world and then suddenly I wasn't really fitting in my community either, because you change by your world view, by who you are, kind of evolve with your experiences and all of the experiences you have. So it was kind of a tough situation to be in and try and maintain a sense of identity and that kind of stuff. You know I talk a lot about athletes. There are Aboriginal athletes that make the Olympics, but not many that come from the Aboriginal context, from the rez, from Northern Winnipeg, predominately Native which houses all the social and historical issues that we have to deal with, our reality and a part of our identity and when you're trying to make the National team or the Olympics, it's the historical and mental baggage that impact you, or inspire you, depending on how you are able to deal with it, so that was probably the hardest part, was trying to figure out how to turn that into a motivating force, rather than something that was going to eventually, you know eventually stop me, so I had to learn how to be comfortable in being sort of caught between those two spaces.

I think my best experience playing water polo, one of them would be playing for Carleton University. It was more because of the team environment, and the coaching, and it was a really, even though I was on the National team at the time, and I was playing with girls that were just learning how to play the sport of water polo, it was like, I mean, not everybody, but there were some really good athletes on my team as well, there was a wide variety of skill sets at that time. It was the team environment that I loved, and whether we became you know, university champions or whatever, it was a really great environment for me. And the coach of the team was a guy named Steve Barrage, and I

think he's still the coach there. He was really good at creating a team environment and he was a great guy. He was my first, he was one of my first water polo coaches when I was like 13 or 14 years old. Getting to play for him was great.

On like sort of a simply skilled, how I played, I think one of the best games I've ever had, challenging was probably the Pan Am Games '99, the gold medal games, and I scored three goals, that was a good game. And then at the Olympics again, our games against the American's where we tied, I scored three goals again, that was probably one of the best games I've ever played.

I tried really hard not to have rituals because once I started to see myself getting into rituals, I stopped myself, and that was because it would be a negative impact on your mental game, if something didn't go in exact order, because athletes are very superstitious people. They put on their same socks the same way, they do all that crazy ass shit, like the play-off beard, and all that crazy kind of stuff. I tried really hard not to do that. The only thing that I did do was probably, and this wasn't if I couldn't do it, I wouldn't freak out, but I always tried to smudge, somehow, tried to smudge, either with sweetgrass or tobacco. That was something I tried to do as much as I could but if I didn't, I would say thank you and be okay with it. Because that's how I was raised. I was raised traditionally by my mother and it wasn't always like the church, you know, where you always have to perform things in certain orders. You know, when you can, you do it. When you can't, you say thank you, and you prepare. But no, I didn't have, I tried not to have any rituals. I liked music a lot. I'm a big fan of music. The one thing at the Olympics that I did do was listen to the same playlist while I was stretching, but it wasn't dependent, I didn't depend everything on it.

I mean we do stuff before a game, that is, you mentally think about, we've had our team meetings so we know, I had a match up, I sit there and I think about the person that I'm matched up defensively, or you know, what's the game plan, what's the strengths, the weaknesses. You're going over all of that but as far as what I think is a ritual is more like, I have to put my clothes on in the same order, that for me, is more ritualistic. More regular game preparation is just having gone over in your head and talked about.

You know what I always did right before, because I was the co-captain at the Olympics, so I used to see myself, the stress of just being at the Olympics, the stress of the crowd, the stress of the media, the stress of the venue. My team was obviously starting to get very nervous and I remember having a conversation with a teammate, two years before that. She was like 33 at the Olympics and I was 24. I remember sitting in a team meeting and the coach would be going over a video, and I would be watching it and taking like meticulous notes over and over, and you could dissect a game to death right, and she's sitting there drawing pictures, counting how many times the coach said the "umm" word or paused, and I'm looking, going "oh my god, you're not taking notes", and she looks at me and she goes, "Waneek, I've been playing this game for like 20 years. It's not that complicated. You have a certain amount of defense and a certain amount of offenses, the rest you have to be instinctual by my age". And I remember thinking, wow, like, it's true, you do it over and over and over and over again. How many different ways can you block a ball? Do you know what I mean?

At some point you have to stop thinking about it. And the other point you have to start doing, letting your body naturally do it. It transcends from a cognitive kind of

functioning, to become part of your ingrained nature, to play, to let loose that natural talent, and that's what she's trying to tell me. She was very gifted. She was a really amazing athlete. I remember I used to be always blown away by, "Oh my god, how did she know to shoot then, or, how did she know how to drive then? Or how did she know how to do that?" Instinctively she just stopped thinking about it and she just did it. You know when you're at the Olympics, you have to be at the point where you're just doing it. That's when you see the Jordans and the, all these people and you're like, "Holy crap they took a chance and it paid off", and, "Oh my god, they just stopped thinking". And so, I really thought about that when I was at the Olympics and said, "What makes me my most confident? When am I playing at my best?" And it was usually was when I was having fun and laughing, so I kind of tried to get like that before games. You know, my teammates were looking at me, and I would be cracking jokes and that kind of stuff, and just saying, you know, it's all in there, and I just have to have faith, and say that all those years of training are going to pay off, because this is what I trained for, and it's all in there because you can't over think it. Because like the death of you, is when you're in a game and down three goals, and you only have one quarter left and you're thinking "Oh my god". You know you start thinking about losing, "We're losing". You know, bored in five seconds, as were watching the Stanley Cup playoffs, and you watch teams that are leading four to one, and there's two minutes left in the game, and teams come back and beat them, and you're like "What the hell?" and teams can come back, even by big margins, in the matter of minutes. You have to still maintain the ability to stay in the moment, and keep your mind focused in the moment, and what you can do right at that moment, and not let yourself get sucked into thinking "Oh my god, we're losing" or

whatever. Live in the moment, be in the moment, play in the moment! Don't try to play a minute ahead, play in the moment and that's what I tried to do.

I think it's a matter of maturity and self-talk. Like you just have to teach yourself to do that. It's not something that comes naturally because I think what people naturally do, is they, in order to mentally be able to deal with a situation, especially a high stress situation like competing at the Olympics or whatever, you think, "I need to prepare myself for failure" you know. And so you subconsciously do that. I need to be okay with it. You need to either really buckle down, and get into the moment, and I mean, it's easier when you're actually playing. You know what I mean? I used to, when I saw my teammates getting into a certain way, I would really get into pumping them up and be like no, "Let's do this now. Let's play this game for the next 30 seconds, we are on defense. Let's shut them down, let's steal the ball". You know, like, I would be screaming at them, because I would be basically telling myself that. So I would try to really harden up, and that was only something I was able to do as I got older.

The Olympics, the whole thing in general, was just really hard, but really amazing. It was disappointing not to win a medal. It was really hard. It was a lot of expectations, a lot of media attention, and then, just personally to just not achieve what you put your mind too, it's really, really hard. Everything about being in team sports, you could have the best game of your life and still not win a medal. It's just team sports, I mean, the Olympics is, people who win gold are the ones that have all the elements, including a little bit of luck, all lined up. All the stars are shining. You know, the physical, the team cohesiveness, the coaching has to be, you know, all these elements have to line up for the things to, you know... Olympic medals are very hard to win.

Every athlete will say there's a little bit of luck. Some luck, but there's always a little bit.

There's always negative. Like there were interpersonal issues on my team that were never dealt with prior to the Olympics and they ended up rearing their ugly head there. I mean the stress was on. Your true colors show. I mean there were coaching issues. Our coaches were quite abusive so their stress levels went up and it was that. I spoke out about the coaches abuse and got them fired. And then we both lost, as in any small sport world. But I look back and I would do it again. Because I was one of the only veterans, because after the Olympics, there's a lot of depression that happens after the Olympics, there's lots, especially if you don't achieve with what you set out to achieve, and so the abuse got worse. And a lot of my other veterans on the team went to Europe and played professional and I was one of the only ones that stayed home, and it just got worse and worse and worse, and I saw it happening. So where I'm from, and how I was raised, and I come from a family of a long line of War Chiefs, and my great grandfather was one, and I remember talking to my mom about what to do and she said, because I was being told by teammates and other veterans, "Don't worry, just keep your head down and whether it's you or not you" and I said, "That's not being part of a team. Being part of a team is worrying about your teammates", and so my mother said, "Well, those are like your sisters and you don't do nothing. We come from a line of War Chiefs and we don't do nothing". And so no, I spoke out. I got the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport to do an investigation. I wasn't the only one. There were other players as well and they came in and did an investigation and told the Water Polo Canada Board if you don't fire these coaches, you will be criminally liable for putting these players in jeopardy. And then my career lasted maybe six months more.

Except I would do it again, because at that point, it was a measure of what are you willing to do. What are you willing to sacrifice in order to go to another Olympics? Are you willing to sacrifice your integrity and how you see yourself? Or are you going to, and I just couldn't do that, and hold my head high, and say, "My name is Waneek, and this was, and I was raised this way". There's a point where your values and your goals, and your values outweigh it, and that's your self- image right.

It's really funny because I was talking recently to someone about it and Muhammed Ali, when he refused to go fight in Vietnam, and he went to jail for two years, that was at the height of his career. That's when he was making tons of money and was everything, the best boxer in the world. And I thought how utterly amazing that he did that. Like his values were more important than his athletic career.

I have a much harder job right now. I have a three year old and I'm just about to give birth to another baby. My husband is in medical school and he's been away for three years so I'm pretty much doing it on my own, and I'm living in my community which has its pluses and negatives, as you well know, and just trying to, I'm doing a lot of public speaking, I'm doing a lot of work with youth and I'm starting grad school in September at Carleton. I really want to look at all of the historical, cultural and social and economic issues that are affecting our motivation and because that's what I speak about when I speak. I speak a lot about, but I really want to get further into it and really kind of want to delve into the academic and philosophical side and you know, look at how we can create strategies to combat that because the fact that people think that we are the half-ass nature in which a lot of times is the way in which, you know and only Native people can say this but it's true. I caught myself doing it as well because it's the way we approach things

because a fear of failure, a fear of success, whatever it is, that's creating this culture of fear of pushing ourselves and that kind of stuff is not our Indigenous state. Our Indigenous state is we come from a very high performance people. They had no other choice. They couldn't be any other way because of the world in which they lived in and they lived in a world of natural selection where if you were lazy, if you were stupid, you know, anything, you pretty much died off because of war, disease and famine, you couldn't be anything less than you're high performance self in order to survive. So how do we get back? How do we tap into that and get our communities because I don't know if you participated in any of the Idle No More stuff but I was protesting that stuff 25 years ago as a teenager. We know what the problems are but what are the issues that make it happen? There are a lot of issues in our community that we ourselves have meet the challenge to fix. We need to stop our women from getting murdered. We need to stop our people from hurting each other. We need to do all these things, it's not fair and we know now why we are like that. No white people or no Native people can come into our community and say "You need to treat each other better. And stop all this lateral violence it's bullying". No one is going to fix it for us so we need to fix it ourselves and so it's like I want to look at a lot of that because that's the environments that I'm being asked to speak in.

I think that there needs to be an intentional long term athlete development strategy developed, not only in my community, but across the country. I think there needs to be a strategic approach to develop our athletes. I think we need to develop our coaches, not just people who volunteer their time, but people who, like in Europe, that's what they do, that's their job. Because what happens now, is you burn people out and you know,

recreation directors are everything and anything when it comes to sport, and we have to look at sport as something that is not an extracurricular activity, but actually as a community building tool, and it's not just about creating Olympic athletes, it's not just about creating only high performance, there needs to be room for everybody to play sports, whether you're gifted or not. Because everybody needs to move, everybody can learn from sport. Everyone can fun in sport. Everybody wants to belong, everyone wants to feel a part of something. When I talk about a long term athlete development strategy, I kind of see every person as an athlete for life. If you can develop those skill sets and levels of play, level of sport in a person, they can be an athlete for life, whether they are going to the Olympics or going for a five kilometre walk or something, but we need to get our people seeing themselves as lifelong athletes so that needs to be an intentional program in our community. Perseverance, it's been, you know, sport and physical activity is my anti-depressant. It's my self- confidence booster, it's who I am. I really go to that when I need it and it's a big part of my life, sports and the people I've met through sport, the places I've been. You know I met my husband, he's gold medal Pan American in Judo so I've gotten a lot through sport, really have. But you know I can't even begin to explain how amazing it was, and the fact that I get to, it's given me a platform to share my stories, to share my vision, to work in the areas that I'm working in. As the sport ambassador for the Assembly of First Nations, that's something that's a true honour, to be able to work in that field is really an honor. To get to speak to Indigenous people all over the place is really amazing.

I think that they have to be prepared to go above and beyond. It's not what little you can do. You have to do more. Native athletes have to be, you have to be better than

you're non-Native competition. That still exists, you have to be twice as good as everyone else because, not only are you fighting stereo-types about our people, but you're fighting those inside yourself as well. You're fighting, and be prepared for it to be hard, tough, grueling work to get where you want to go. But that's what defines you as well. That oooh hard grueling work is something that you can be proud of as well. You know what I mean? People think everything's easy. The instant 100 percent return on our investments in something that, like, is only recent. We want instant gratification. I want you to answer my text message instantly or else.

You need to see, like people don't understand that I'm, as an Olympic athlete, minimum of 10 years. It's a minimum of 10 years of training day in and day out, away from your community, away from your family, focusing 100% on what you're doing, no drugs, no alcohol, no partying. You know like it's, you are really on a life journey, it's totally encompassing. But it's not going to be forever, that's the thing about sports. You will return.

The best advice I ever got was when I was missing home I felt bad and whatever, "Waneek, we're not going anywhere. We'll be here. Kahnawake is not going anywhere". And it's true. And be prepared to have changed through that process. Parents and family and friends have to understand and have to be able to recognize how hard it is for an athlete, and try to give them support, and know that there is a time, and I know that a lot of high performance athletes that I've spoken to that are Indigenous, have gone through very dark depression, very bad depression. Because it's almost like you're being re-born into this gray area. You have to be okay with just floating between two worlds.

To have support from family, you know I was lucky to have a mother and sisters,

who kind of were going through the same thing in their area, so we could identify with each other. Whatever success they see, I would hope that it is, they have given 150% whether it's Olympic gold, whether it's varsity basketball, know that you have done absolutely everything in your power to achieve whatever the top of your mountain was, and that you didn't cut yourself short, out of fear or being worried about not fitting in at home, or whatever. Because at the end of the day, that's when you can really just say that I did absolutely everything in my power to be the best athlete I could be.

When I went to the Olympics, it was the hardest experience of my life. But I know that there was nothing more I could have done. Absolutely nothing, physically, mentally, emotionally, I couldn't have done anything else. And that, I was able to walk away from that experience proud, and I didn't win a medal, but I was proud because that was the top of my mountain. And I want more of our young people to feel that, and not be afraid to push themselves and lay it all out there. Because at the end of the day, you know, they can be proud and then there is life afterwards, which is awesome. Being a parent is amazing, you know, being a friend, being a sister, being an aunty, all these things are incredible.

And yeah, the Olympics are intoxicating, and being a great athlete is amazing, but what has really made my life full and rich are all those other experiences. I mean, yeah the Olympic experience is amazing, and I use that to impact a lot of things, but in the end, I think being a mother for me is it. There's nothing that can compete with that. So what I'm trying to say is, "Don't worry, the world will not end!" There's a huge world out there, with a whole bunch of other successes and experiences so don't be afraid to lay it all out there, and push yourself, and live in the moment. Enjoy what you're going

through and achieve and enjoy that achievement and all those things. Because in the end, you'll, hopefully, you'll bring them home, to the community and share them with other people, and use it to improve and enhance the community, the whole (Waneek Horn-Miller, interviewed, May 2013).

Athlete 8: Caroline Calve

Caroline Calve is a snowboarder from Alymer, Quebec. She was born on October 1, 1978 in Hull, Quebec and she won two World Championships in 2011 and 2012 in snowboarding. Her dad is an Algonquin First Nation. Caroline started snowboarding when she was 16 years old.

Caroline Calve's story:

I started racing about 11 years ago so about 2002. I got involved because I skied before and I sort of just discovered snowboarding, because it was getting popular as a sport, because it was such a young sport and a friend of mine said, "Why don't you just start racing?" and I thought I was old, but I said "Why not?", you know I only have one life and I decided to commit for a couple of years. Skiing, I started at the age of five and snowboarding, I tried when I was 16, and started competing when I was 22 years old. There was no program in the Outaouais for snowboard racing, so my friend who had convinced me to start racing, lived in Mont Tremblant, and he coached a club in Mont Tremblant, and I decided to join the club, doing mostly training, and doing all the little provincial races.

When I started I was older, I was an adult. I could make my own decisions. I could move to wherever I wanted and do whatever, as long as I could support that. So one thing that has always helped, the fact that my parents have, they have always been

super supportive. Even then, they didn't think I was crazy to start competing at that age, and they gave me tons of support. They helped me financially and I mean, I think that if I would have been not doing anything, not training, not working, they wouldn't have helped me that much, but I showed that I was really determined, so I think that they decided that they were going support me, and they always did, without any thought behind it. Then I met my boyfriend the first year, that I started competing and I'm still with him, so I've been with him for a really long time. Because he was an athlete as well at that point, it was really easy to support each other. Yeah he was my boyfriend, but really he was my best friend, you know, so having that person through the journey with me was a lot.

I have a great coach now, a guy that really shows a lot of, he's just really great as a person, and he's just really involved in more than just being a coach. I never had that before. So I can say that I always had coaches, but they were just basically there on the hill. So coaches not really. I've had people through the years to support me in different years. But to have someone that was really there all the time with me was really, well like I said, was my boyfriend. And some really good sponsors who stuck with me for a really long time. I mean my family has always been great but they're not always there, but kind of like, a long distance support.

I never had a goal like the Olympics or the World Championship, like I never thought of a big international event. I just thought I really wanted to get good at this and that's how I started for the first couple of years. After a few years of falling a lot, it's really tough at first, because it's a normal process. I picked it up quite easily because I skied so much before. I remember thinking three or four years into it, I thought if I could

stand up and not crash all the time, then I could be really good, and 2006 came along and just before 2006 when we were doing all the World Cups for qualifying for the Olympics in Reno, just before then, it was sort of then, that it clicked that year of 2005, because I wasn't really able to qualify, because I wasn't doing all the World Cups but just the little bit that I was doing, I thought, I'm not that far off, you know, so it sort of developed then, my dream of going to the Olympics.

The first few years were really tough, just because I was learning to be a competitor and learning to do my sport, and just learning how to deal with everything, because I'd never been an athlete before so how do you deal with the, not doing so well at a race, or crashing, or how do you deal with having a really bad training day. All those things, and at first you know, because I was older, I hadn't started when I was young. I'd always felt like I needed, like I had some time to make up for. Like all those years that I didn't do the sport. I felt I needed to do more than everyone else, just to get to their level of experience, and it took me years to feel like I belonged to this sport, or that I felt that it was my sport too, you know. I mean I felt like an imposter almost for a long time I remember, and that kind of evaporated I guess. I don't feel like that at all anymore. It was weird, it was kind of felt like I was pretending to be an athlete, as opposed to really owning what I was doing. That was really a big challenge at first.

When you become someone that's a lot more experienced and stuff, you have a plan. You have a way of doing things. You have certain things you want to do when you're racing, and I think that those days, were just bang on, in terms of, I followed my race plan, I had a great mental state. I mean, I was in a great mental state. I'm always trying to get to a point, I call it my "quasi state of mind", but I try to have a quiet mind. I

have to feel like I'm peaceful, I'm peaceful with myself. I always try and get to that state of mind, and those days I had that. I followed my plan. I managed stressful situations well. So I had, you know, good self-talk. All those things that you prepare for, it happened really well. So those are the kind of experiences that I look at and say, what worked well, what didn't, and how did I react, and how do I prepare for the next race by looking at those races.

Leading up to those events, because I won two World Cups and those two, the difference between that, and finishing third or finishing fourth, the difference between those, is that I had that attitude, where the results didn't matter, so I wasn't stressed about a result, I was just doing what I was supposed to do, one run after the other and that's it, because the previous days leading up to the race, I wasn't thinking, "Oh god I have to win this race tomorrow", I was really thinking, "I'm excited for this race, I can't wait to see what it's going to look like" and, "I'll do my best and I get there and I qualify and I move on to the finals", and then I do one run after the other, and then I boom I win, you know. What I try and get to, when I'm racing essentially is the point where, like I said, I call it the quiet mind, the quiet state of mind. I try to get to a point where I'm really calm in my head. I'm not full of emotion. I don't want to react to things with emotion so if I make a mistake going down the hill, I don't want to be emotional about it. So I don't want to have a reaction like, "Ah, I just missed that", or "Ah, I slid and I shouldn't have slid". So I really just want to stay really Zen and quiet and calm, I don't know what else, what other synonym I could use. But really just that focus on the now, the "what I do, the one turn at a time". And when I'm up there, at the start, I'm not going to be chit-chatting with everyone and laughing and being all you know, excited. I'm usually like really quiet

and the same. I'm not angry and I'm not happy, I'm just really focused on what I'm doing and again, when I'm at the start, I have a plan and I follow that, you know, let's say, I get there and I go to the start of the course, and I visualize, I look at the course that I'm going to be in, and I see myself competitively going through the course, again and again and again. And then I go to the next step, and the next step, and the next step. So I'm always focused on my plan and I'm always very calm in my head.

I totally have my routine laid out. It's a pre-competition plan basically. The reason why I have these plans, so what I do, is I write down all the things that I do the week before the race, the day before the race, the night before the race, the morning of the race, you know, things like that. And I do all this stuff, for example, the day before the race, I have my breathing exercises, and then I want to see myself going through the course I'm going to be on the next day, and I want to really see it in a way that it's positive, it's aggressive, it's focused, it's all the things that I want to see myself doing the next day, so I'll do that. The morning of the race, this is something that I'm going to try out this year, but I want to write down every morning before a race, all my thoughts and emotions, kind of lay it all down on paper and then I can walk free from it.

Because we have ten races in a day, you have time to see people racing, and you can say "Oh wow, she had a great time" or "She just had a really great run" and "Will I be able to beat that". You know, you have all these thoughts that come up, I don't know, you're looking for something, and you can't find it. Is this a sign? You know, like you can let your brain think of all these things and be affected by it. The idea is to not be affected by all that stuff. You can only control what you can control and that's it. All those things is stuff that's happening and you kind of need to, and again when I say, when

I talked about the self talk, you need to have a plan for all those thoughts like what happens if I have those thoughts. What do you say to yourself? How do I get rid of them and all that?

I actually had pretty disappointing performances at World Champs this year. We had two events and they both didn't go well for different reasons. That was tough but I know why they happened. The first day was the GS and I basically got up to the start, and I was going to do my first run of qualifiers. I went down the first pitch, and right at the bottom of the pitch, I kind of, we call it "booting out". It's kind of when you're snowboarding and you can sometimes touch your heels in the snow, and if you touch your heels in the snow, it unhooks your edge from the snow, so that's not good you just slide out, you know and that's the feeling I got when I crashed in the GS, so that was done. I was over, I only did one run in qualifying at the PGS World Champs, so that was really disappointing, but I realized after thinking about, what happened. It started from, it started before I got in the gate. I was thinking, I remember thinking, okay this is World Champs and I got to put it on. I got to really do something great. I was just thinking, and thinking that I had to do more than what I usually do, and I think that when I've done well I've always said to myself, "Just do what you can, just do what you know" and at World Champs, I totally tried to do more in that run. So I got to the bottom of the pitch so I thought, "Now I'm on the bottom and I'm really going to give her. I'm really going to edge hard, and I'm going to try and make all kinds of speed", and it totally didn't work. Because it was stupid to think that, on that kind of surface, you know it was a really tough kind of snow, and you couldn't put that kind of pressure on the snow, so anyways, that's what happened. It was a mistake but I learned from it.

That whole week before, so we get there a whole week before, and everything was different than usual. It was unorganized. Our condo's were all, you know, usually we stay all at the same hotel, downtown Quebec, and we're all together like all the athletes from the countries, and we all have the same sort of meal plan and all that stuff, but this year, the coaches decided to stay in condo's near the hill, and then because of that, we were all split. We had to drive to go bring our boards to the technician. We had to drive to get physio. We had to drive to go see the coaches. It was just super complicated. Logistics were not organized properly. Everything was just draining. My main coach couldn't come because he had an emergency with his family, all kinds of stuff like that. So I think that when I got to the race, I was already a little bit, not mixed up, but I was already not the best of possible scenarios. I remember being nervous and I remember just thinking that, "You can do this, you're going..", and it's not the talk that I usually have with myself, it was different.

Sometimes when you're in a stressful situation where you really want, well you know, we really talk about how we need to focus on the process and not the outcome, so when you're focused on the outcome, and you really want to do well, and you want that win or that podium or whatever, well it brings the stress with it, so if you concentrate always on the result, you're going to be much more stressed, than if you concentrate on the little things that you have to work. So if you concentrate on just putting one step in front of the other, you're not stressed. But if you think "Oh my god I have to run 42 miles", then it's a little bit more stressful, and it's the same idea when you're racing, you kind of just want to focus on one gate at a time, and I think that, because I had the outcome in my mind, you know, it screws with your brain, and you start thinking that you have to do all

these things to achieve your outcome, and I totally bought, I didn't follow my plan. Yeah I just forgot that I needed to focus on what I can do, and I know that what I can is enough to qualify and to win.

What's great about losing is that you get a chance to learn something, and it's so important when you do lose, it sucks because you just want to forget about it, you just want to turn the page and want to move on to the next competition, but it's those loses that teach you everything, that teach you how to win. So those are the races that are the most important to look at because, like my race at the World Champs and say, "I'm never going to do that again". I know that when things are out of my control and are screwed up before a race, it doesn't need to affect me. And when I'm at the start, I can re-focus and tell myself, "You know what to do, you don't need to do more than what you know". And yeah, so I think there are great things you can learn in losing.

Right now, I'm back at training so I train at the gym. I train with my sports psychologist, and I have a lot of training to do, so I'm trying to manage the way I recover and I have a hard time doing that so right now, I'm trying to focus on how to recover properly. In terms of, you know, you train physically all the hours of the day, your body is tired so you can sleep, and that's a recovery mode, but there are other things you can do, and sometimes just having an eight hour night, an eight hour sleep at night, is not enough. You need to have a nap or sometimes your legs will hurt, so you need to put your compression pants on and that helps. You can do recovery exercises like the bike rides that are really low intensity and take a bath. There's all these things, like body recovery, but there's also yourself sort of spirit recovery.

You know, like I was never an athlete when I was 12 so I don't know what a 12

year old would think, but I for sure know that when I speak in schools, when I meet young people in schools or whatever, they are always so inspired by what you've achieved as an athlete. Whether you won a medal or not, it doesn't matter. It's just the fact that you've done this, you know, with such determination and perseverance, that they are inspired by that. I think that it's important to share and when I say they're inspired, they are inspired for it to be their goals and their dreams, not this athletic stuff, you know. So I think, the power of athletes speaking to kids is great. You know, there's a program out west it's called the First Nations snowboard team and this guy, Aaron Marchant, an Aboriginal guy from Squamish, and he decided to bring kids from his community to snowboard. He got the snowboards for free, he got the passes for free and he said "I'm going to get them on a bus and I'm going to show them how to snowboard", and it's getting them out there, without any commitment, not commitment, but in terms of, because sport is expensive, that's the thing. So a lot of people don't have the means to play hockey if they want, or do to this or to do that. So programs like those are awesome. You know, like what Aaron has done with the First Nations snowboard team. He not only brought kids that would have never have experienced snowboarding on the hills and making turns, but he's also starting programs to make them teachers, and then to teach others how to snowboard. So I think that those kind of initiatives are awesome.

You know to be an athlete, whether or not to be in professional sports or like me, an amateur sport, you need discipline, you need to set goals to put a goal at the end of your line and say, "I'm going to reach that one day", and every day you need plan something. So I think that definitely setting goals, and making a plan, or sport has definitely taught me that, and I definitely apply that in everything else.

I think that we have to dare to dream. I think that we can all, like I'm such a normal person, I'm like the most normal human being on the planet. I really think that we all have greatness in ourselves, and it all has to do with being determined, to get to a certain level, or to get to what we set out in a plan, and I think you really need to have people encouraging you, in that, so whether it's a teacher at school, or your Phys Ed teacher, or your uncle, or your aunt, or your friends, or someone in your community, it can be your parents of course, or your brothers or sisters, that can support you while you're doing your sport. I mean, there's always going to be someone that says, "Ugghh, your training again, that sucks". Just to keep that perspective, you know, it takes a lot, it takes to be there, it takes determination, because there are obstacles, because you lose more than you win (Caroline Calve, interviewed May 2013).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain an in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence. The specific objectives of this study were, (a) to better understand how each athlete attained his/her high level of success; (b) to explore what obstacles each athlete faced on their way to the top of their sport and how they managed or overcame those obstacles; and, (c) to explore what advice they would give to young First Nation, Inuit, or Métis athletes who want to attain similar high level goals in sport.

It is hoped that through the personal stories presented above, an in-depth understanding of the eight elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes personal journeys to excellence was captured. This chapter will begin with a discussion of storytelling. Success elements and obstacles will then be examined.

Storytelling

Storytelling is the way in which histories were handed down from generation to generation in many First Nation communities across Canada (Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008). Therefore, it is very fitting to have the stories of the elite First Nation, Inuit and Métis athletes presented in this research. As mentioned previously, narrative analysis was utilized to present the results of this study. Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes (2010) describe narrative analysis as being in the plural since there are many ways that narrative analysis can be considered. For one, narrative analysis can be viewed under the umbrella term of story analyst and storyteller. The eight elite Aboriginal athletes stories in the results section is presented utilizing the storyteller standpoint. Smith and Sparkes (2009) state that storytelling for sport psychologists is moving from explaining through stories, to genuinely connecting and thinking through stories. Sport

psychologists must think about how they want the stories and their storytellers to be considered and what they need other people to hear about their stories. Furthermore, stories can help storytellers make sense of their lives (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009). When elite female boxer Mary Spencer thought about how things went wrong for her at the 2012 Olympics, she told her story of how she lost her focus because of her environmental surroundings, which made sense to her only after thinking about it, after telling her story. “Stories can also ‘breathe’ meaning and lived experience” (Smith and Sparkes, 2009, p.279). Stories help real experiences come to life. For example, when Billy Mills described his gold medal 10K Olympic win, he described it in such great detail that reading it, you can feel as if you were really there. Finally, stories can help the storyteller to remember the important things about themselves (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009). Former NHL hockey player John Chabot remembers vividly his first times skating when he was four years old. The power of storytelling is evident in the eight stories presented in this research. The elements of success that emerged from the eight Aboriginal athletes in this study will now be discussed. .

Success elements

The success elements found in this study were: Aboriginal elements, focus, mental preparation for competition, positive self-talk, passion, and parental support.

Throughout the stories it was evident that unique Aboriginal cultural and/or spiritual elements were perceived by the athletes as helping them focus and aiding their success. In Aboriginal culture there are four sacred medicines that are believed to aid in maintaining health and spirituality and these medicines are sweetgrass, sage, tobacco and cedar (Waldram et al., 2007). The findings from this study were consistent with the findings from Schinke, Peltier & Yungblut (2013) who found that Aboriginal athletes placed importance on integrating spiritual

practices into their sport. For example, Schinke et al. found also that elite Aboriginal athletes smudged when they had challenges in sport and could not solve the challenges through their training methods. Moreover, athletes would seek out Elders for their advice and for inspiration, and they would seek out medicine people, men or women deemed to be healers, for their knowledge and use of sacred medicines and traditional herbs (Schinke et al., 2013). Therefore, this study and the research of Schinke et al., demonstrates that for Aboriginal athletes, it may be very important to add cultural and spiritual components to their training and preparation programs and that Elders and medicine people compare with sport psychologists and doctors in mainstream society. Schinke et al. (2013) report that Elders and medicine people have knowledge that has been passed on from generation to generation which makes it evident why Aboriginal athletes prefer the hands-on intergenerational knowledge over mainstream practices. These findings have important implications for coaches working with Aboriginal athletes as it stresses the importance of recognizing the value and supporting the integration of cultural and spiritual elements. The importance of focus was highlighted by all of the eight elite Aboriginal athletes in this study. This finding is consistent with research with non-Aboriginal athletes which has shown that focus is important for high performance athletic success (Benz, 2009; Burke, 2003; Moran, 2009; Orlick 2008). Orlick (2008) asserts that focus in sport occurs when the athlete is concentrated on elements important to the performance while excluding everything else. In other words, the athlete is one with the performance as nothing else matters.

However, although focus is important research the findings from this study as well as research with non-Aboriginal athletes has shown that maintaining focus can be challenging. In a study of the mental skills of NHL players, Barbour found that the players experienced difficulty staying fully focused during a peak performance. Similarly, in this study, elite female boxer

Mary Spencer describes the difficulty in maintaining the same focus from beginning to end in a peak performance, which caused her to have a less than best performance. Given the findings from this study and past research on the importance of focus, as well as the challenges associated with achieving and maintaining focus, it is important for coaches of all athletes to help athletes strengthen this skill.

Similar to focus, research has shown that mental preparation for competition can enhance an athlete's performance and a great competition plan can help an athlete excel and reach their peak performance (Porter & Foster, 1986). Orlick and Partington (1988) found that the best athletes developed plans and procedures for competitions and called this their mental preparation for competition. These plans often include a pre- competition plan, a competition focus plan, an evaluation procedure and a distraction plan. The findings from this study also showed that pre-competition plans were an important part of mental preparation for the Aboriginal elite athletes. For example, elite snowboarder Caroline Calve described her pre-competition plan in detail and also described her focus plan on competition day. She talked about how she evaluated her races immediately after competition. Furthermore, she described how she gets into a "quasi state of mind" to help her focus and avoid distractions.

Another success element that emerged from this study was passion. Gustafsson et al. (2011) state that passion is defined as "a strong inclination towards an activity that individuals enjoy and consider important, and in which they invest considerable time and energy" (p. 387). Recent research on passion has identified two different types of passion, obsessive passion and harmonious passion (Cox, 2012). Obsessive passion represents control and drives an individual to partake in an activity even though it may conflict with other areas in the individual's life whereas harmonious passion represents a willingness to partake in activities that an individual

likes. Harmonious passion is positive and preferred, whereas obsessive passion negatively affect athletes (Cox, 2012) and has been linked to potential burnout (Gustafsson et al. 2011). The passion described by the athletes in this study appears to be harmonious since the athletes talked about their passion positively and attained success through their passion. For example, former NHL hockey player Gino Odjick believes that an elite athlete must have passion to succeed as passion enables commitment to sport. His described how his passion allowed him to commit to his practices and to his fitness so that he could become the best hockey player he could be. In addition, former elite runner Billy Mills believes that his passion for running allowed him to commit himself to practicing daily and eventually finding success as a gold medal Olympian.

Positive self-talk was another element mentioned by a number of the Aboriginal elite athletes in this study. Cox (2012) defines self-talk as “overt or covert personal dialogue in which the athlete interprets feelings, perceptions, and convictions and gives himself instructions and reinforcement” (p.223). Cox asserts that self-talk should always be utilized positively and that such positive self-talk can be a way of energizing the athlete to have a better performance and more energy. Zourbanos (2013) describes two paradigms of self-talk research in sport, the first one refers to inherent self-talk, and describes something that is not planned as it is automatic and in the moment. The second paradigm refers to mental strategy, and is prepared words or saying that athletes would say to themselves in key moments during the game. Moreover, there are two main functions, cognitive and motivation, of self-talk (Cox, 2012; Zourbanos, 2013). The cognitive function allows the athlete to focus on developing skills, improving, executing and strategizing. The motivation function allows the athlete to focus, gain self-confidence, maintain control and energize (Cox, 2012). In this study, it was found that the athletes used positive self-talk as a mental strategy for both functions, For example, former NHL player John Chabot

utilized the cognitive function of self-talk by chanting key phrases such as “shoot the puck” or if he struggled because of a fancy move that he did, he would chant “keep it simple” while former NHL player Gino Odjick used the motivation function of self-talk as he would tell himself that he was the greatest to give himself that push that he needed.

The element that seemed to be perceived as the most important in achieving success and discussed in depth by all of the athletes was parental support. Each of the eight elite Aboriginal athletes had strong parental support and talked about the support from their parents in a positive light. These findings are consistent with those from past research with Aboriginal athletes as well as with non-Aboriginal elite athletes (Cotê, 1999; Weiss, 2004). With regards to Aboriginal athletes, Schinke et al. (2013) also found that parental support was immense. Parents encouraged participation in healthy activities and sport early on, provided transportation to and from training and games, gave guidance when needed, and financially helped their child in the sport domain. Moreover, support came from extended family as well, which included siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins (Schinke et al., 2013). Family members, mainly grandparents, would travel far to attend games and support the athlete and aunts and uncles would show support by sharing struggles and advice from their own athletic life. In relation to research on non-Aboriginal athletes, Cotê interviewed 15 elite athletes along with their families to describe the dynamics of the families of elite athletes and (1999) found that parents of elite athletes supported their children in positive ways and did not put additional pressure on their children in terms of what sport to specialize in or in terms of performing better.

In addition to support, Cotê also reported that parents of elite athletes made sacrifices to allow their young athlete to have better training. This was also true for some of the athletes in this study. For example, former NHL hockey player John Chabot talked about the sacrifices his

parents made. He described the financial sacrifices and time commitments his parents made to support his hockey career early on.

Obstacles

All of the eight elite athletes in this study faced a variety of obstacles. Although there were less commonalities among the obstacles compared to the success elements it is important to recognize that all of the athletes did face obstacles and that some of these were similar across the athletes. The most common obstacle was the experience of racism and adversity for being Aboriginal. This finding was consistent with the research by Schinke et al. (2007) who reported racism as a difficult barrier to overcome for the elite Aboriginal athletes in their study. Another obstacle that was experienced by some of the athletes was having to leave their home community to pursue their sport which again was similar to previous research, particularly for athletes who have emigrated from their home country to be able to pursue their athletic dreams (Schinke et al., 2011). The athletes in this study as well as those in the study conducted by Schinke et al. (2007) reported feeling lonely after leaving their family, friends, and communities. Therefore, the findings from this study further supports the recommendation made by athletes in the Schinke et al. (2007) study related to providing culture specific courses for coaches to enhance their awareness of the barriers that elite Aboriginal athletes face and in particular those related to racism and the hardships of having to leave their home communities.

In sum, the elite Aboriginal athletes in this study identified a number of success elements as well as barriers. Some of these elements and barriers seem to be unique to being an Aboriginal athlete such as the incorporation of cultural and spiritual practices to enhance success and the experience of racism related to being Aboriginal in particular. These unique factors have important implications for coaches and sport organizations working with Aboriginal athletes. In

particular, if more Aboriginal athletes are to succeed in sport it may be pertinent to ensure that coaches and organizations are educated in how they can best support their Aboriginal athletes by working with them to integrate their cultural and spiritual practices and to work to end the racism experienced by these athletes. However, it is also important to note that many of the success elements identified are the same as those identified by non-Aboriginal athletes such as focus, mental preparation, self-talk, passion, and parental support. Therefore, it appears that there are important skills such as learning how to maintain focus that all athletes appear to need to succeed in achieving their athletic goals.

Advice from elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes

The advice given from the elite Aboriginal athletes in this study was rich and meaningful. Although most of the advice was varied, there are a few commonalities. The most common advice given was to ensure to learn lessons in sport. Orlick (2008) supports this by describing the importance in growing and learning from every experience and opportunity in sport. The second most common advice was to ensure that you enjoy what you are doing as an athlete. Similarly, Barbour (1994) found that an important element for NHL players was enjoyment. Other common advice included working hard and maintaining focus.

Guest and Cox (2009) state the elite athletes are in a position to be viewed as roles models because of their fame and their success in sport. All of the athletes in this study are viewed as role models and at times, give motivational and inspirational speeches to First Nations, Inuit, or Métis youth. For example, elite snowboarder Caroline Calve described how she gives motivational speeches to Aboriginal high school youth. Elite boxer Mary Spencer talks to the Aboriginal community as I have met her giving a motivational speech to First Nations people at

the Odawa Native Friendship Centre in Ottawa, Ontario. One of the greatest gifts that First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth will gain from advice given in this study is inspiration to achieve their own goals and aspirations in life.

Limitations

Although it was my original intent to do all interviews in person, face-to-face, this was not possible due to logistical issues and long distances to meet athletes face-to-face. As a result only two interviews were done face-to-face in-person, and the remaining six interviews were done via telephone. The telephone interviews went very well even though the researcher was not able to read body language, facial expressions, and gestures that may researchers believe can provide additional useful information that usually comes with face-to-face interviews (Gratton & Jones, 2010).

The interviews typically lasted 45 minutes and only one interview was conducted with each of the eight athletes. It would have been valuable to conduct at least one more follow-up interview with each athlete if that had been possible. However, due to the busy schedules of these active and former athletes as well as accessibility to the athletes was limited a second interview was not possible. According to Mack et al. (2005), although conducting only one interview is typical with qualitative research, it is a limitation because it is not as flexible as other methods of data collection such as participation observation and ethnography. Furthermore, Culver et al. (2012) found that conducting multiple interviews benefitted the researcher in that follow up issues and questions were answered subsequently by the participant, who also had a chance to give more details to previous questions. In addition, multiple interviewing allows the researcher to increase trust and rapport with the participant, and also allows for more rich and complete data.

During the interviews, time was a limitation with three of the eight athletes as they had very busy schedules and therefore could only provide a short timeframe for the interview. I feel that if these time limitations did not exist, then the content of the interviews might have been richer and more detailed. I specifically remember one interview where we had a twenty five minute limit and felt that the athlete was rushing with his answers at times. I did inquire for another interview in each of the three cases but they declined explaining that there was not enough time for another interview.

A final consideration that may, in some cases, be a limitation, is the qualitative researchers reliance on the participants' memories. In this study, there were four retired athletes and many years have passed since they competed for two of the athletes. This could potentially compromise the detail of the data recalled, and therefore potentially be a limitation of this study.

Future Research Considerations

As stated in the introduction of this thesis, there is very little research on elite Aboriginal athletes. More research needs to be done in all areas related to elite Aboriginal athletes. For example, when I was researching the number of elite Aboriginal athletes in Canada and/or the United States, I could not find a specific numbers of how many Aboriginal athletes are currently involved in sport. Therefore, it is not known at this time, how many elite Aboriginal athletes there are in Canada or the world. Another area of research that could be explored is the availability of sports in Aboriginal communities. It was mentioned in this study that opportunity is a key factor in participation in sport, and yet it is not known what sports are available in Aboriginal communities. Racism was also an issue raised in this study, and cultural competency could be explored as well, culturally competent coaches as well as culturally competent athletes. These are just a few of the many important issues that could be explored in future studies to gain

a further understanding of the development and nurturing of elite Aboriginal athletes.

Final Summary

It is believed that storytelling is a great way to present the athletes stories as storytelling is the way that histories are handed down in many First Nations communities across Canada. The stories presented are interesting, unique, and inspirational and it is my hope that these stories reach and inspire First Nation, Inuit and Métis youth.

Like other First Nations peoples, I grew up on a reserve and know of the barriers to sport that exist in First Nation communities. An important concern moving forward, as mentioned by two of the athletes in this study, is access to sport for many First Nations communities across Canada. Other barriers that I experienced while growing up were access to coaches, athletic role models and athletic facilities. How can we give First Nation, Inuit and Métis youth opportunities when they do not yet exist! Further research and increased funding are needed to enhance such opportunities.

When given the opportunity, encouragement and support, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people can succeed as well as anyone else in the world. This is proven by Jim Thorpe, among others, who excelled in track and field, baseball and football. If First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth can reach the highest levels in the world in their sport, they can also do it in anything else if they are given the financial support, and moral and coaching support that is required to excel in any human pursuit.

As an Algonquin First Nations person, I have just completed my Master's Degree at the University of Ottawa primarily because the opportunities were open to me and I chose to embrace those opportunities with the support of my family, professors and the high performance First Nation, Inuit and Métis athletes who agreed to share with me their personal journeys to the

highest levels of excellence in their chosen pursuits.

There are a number of implications in this study that have been outlined above and it is hoped that this study will be one among others that appeals to academics to conduct more research related to First Nation, Inuit and Métis youth and sport and that the personal journeys shared by the elite athletes inspires other First Nation, Inuit and Métis people to pursue the highest levels of excellence in any field or pursuit.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to interview elite First Nations, Inuit, and Métis athletes to gain a more in-depth understanding of their personal journeys to excellence in sport. This was done through narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with some of Canada's most elite Aboriginal athletes. Each of the eight elite Aboriginal athletes in this study told their stories in their own words. These stories are inspirational and very rich in the athletes telling of their stories and sharing details of their journeys. There are lessons to be learned from each of these athletes to help others attain the highest levels of excellence.

The specific objectives of this study were to explore success strategies, obstacles, and advice these athletes have for young Aboriginal athletes. The main success strategies were found to be; Aboriginal elements, focus, mental preparation for competition, parental support, passion, and positive self-talk. Racism and leaving home were the common challenges found. .

I was truly inspired during all phases of this research. I was inspired by the stories of Jim Thorpe, Billy Mills, Cathy Freeman, and all of the other athletes interviewed in this study. The insights and personal journeys to excellence shared by the elite Aboriginal athletes in this study provide a deeper understanding of the role of success strategies and obstacles encountered during their journey. The insights gained from this study can be of practical value for sport psychologists, aspiring athletes, seasoned athletes, coaches, teachers and parents.

During the interview with elite snowboarder Caroline Calve, she stated that, "the power of athletes speaking to kids is great". I truly believe this and I believe that all youth can be inspired by the stories and advice given in this study.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Background Information (Probe for details after asking each question)

1. When did you start participating in your sport? How did you initially get involved in your sport? Can you tell me about your journey from where you started to where you are now?
2. At that time did you have any goals or dreams of becoming a great athlete? What were your goals at that time? At what point did you actually start to believe that you could be one of the best performers in the world?
3. Who were the people who supported you most in your journey to personal excellence in your chosen sport? Who helped you most in the beginning, as you started to develop as an athlete, and when you became a world class athlete? How did those people support you at different points in your life?
4. What were the biggest challenges or distractions you faced as an athlete on this journey?

Best- Ever Performances (Probe for details after asking each question)

1. What was one of your best-ever performances (races, games, competitions, matches etc)?
2. Why do you think that performance or game became a best performance for you? Did you train, prepare, plan, rest, focus or do anything different leading up to that best performance?
3. What were you thinking about or focusing on just before you began to perform, race, run, play or compete in that best performance? Do you have any pre-game rituals?
4. What were you focusing on (or connected to) at the start of the performance, at different points during the performance and towards the end of the performance?
5. Did you experience any distractions before or during this performance? If yes, what was the distraction and how did you focus through the distraction? If you did not experience any distractions, how did you stay focused and avoid being distracted in that context?
6. How are things going for you at this point in your life? Where is your focus center at this point in your life?
7. What do you think you have learned in sport that you are applying or can apply to other areas of your life?

Less Than Best Performances (Probe for details after asking each question)

1. What was one of your less than best or most disappointing performances (races, games, competitions, matches etc)?
2. Why do you think that performance became a less than best performance for you? Did you train, prepare, plan, rest, focus or do anything different leading up to that less than best performance?
3. What were you thinking about or focusing on just before you began to perform, race, run, play, or compete in that less than best performance?
4. What were you focusing on (or connected to) at the start of the performance, at different points within the performance, and towards the end of the performance?
5. Did you experience any distractions, doubts or negative thoughts before or during that performance? If yes, what was the distraction, negative thought or doubt? Were you able to focus through this doubt or distraction? If you were not able to focus through the distraction or doubt or negative thought, why do you think you were not able to refocus and get back on a positive track?

Last thoughts/Advice

1. What do you think could be done in your community right now to help other young people or developing athletes achieve the high levels of performance excellence that you achieved?
2. What advice do you have for young First Nations athletes who want to become great performers in their chosen sport?
3. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B

Sample Interview Transcript

*Interview with Waneek Horn-Miller
May 21, 2013*

So I'd like to start out by saying thank you Waneek for being a part of this study.

I'll start out with some background information. When did you get started participating in your sport and how did you get initially involved.

I've been participating since I was I guess a small, I was 5 years old. My mother put us in sports because we were really hyperactive kids and she wanted, like my mother was older having children, she was 31, I was born when she was 36, and she grew up in a house that didn't have the best role models. She did a lot of reading and wanted to give her daughters the best opportunities for success. She knew they had to learn a certain skill set like perseverance and how to take care of themselves, how to respect others, how to achieve and all these things. She found that she could do that through sport, so she chose competitive swimming and competitive running which were sports that, they weren't judged sport as she didn't want us to be, like gymnastics or figure skating or even team sports as young kids because like she was worried that our Native, our difference would come into play. If it was just us against the sport, we had some control over them. Me and my sisters were all put into competitive swimming and competitive running.

How many siblings do you have?

I have 3, 2 older sisters, 1 younger.

How old are you now?

I am 37.

Can you talk about from your journey to where you are now?

Talk about what in particular?

Talk about how you went into your sport initially and how you came out of it.

That's a very vague..umm, I was a competitive swimmer for 6 years and I had made, when I was like 11, 12, I was Ontario Champion and stuff like that for swimming and made international, national times and stuff like that. By the time I was 13 I was getting bored with swimming and by the time I got into high school, I discovered water polo. So that's how it went. I started in grade 9. My oldest sister, Justso, who is now a medical doctor, she was on the water polo team at our high school so she was in grade 13 and I was in grade 9 and she got me to come out in play and I really loved it and by that time I wanted to be in a team sport and I wanted to have some social aspect to it so I started playing. When I was about 18, no 17 and I made the junior National team of Canada and then when I was 18, I made the senior National team of Canada and then when I was 24 I went to the Olympics and then when I was 27 I was kicked off the National team.

Okay.

It's like basic, a very basic history.

Ok no worries. At the time you started in your sport, did you have dreams of becoming a great athlete?

Oh definitely ever since I heard of the Olympics, ever since I was a kid. The first time I heard of the Olympics, I was about 7, 8 years old and it was when Alwyn Morris was competing in the 84 Olympic games and also when the movie 'Running Brave' which was about Billy Mills winning gold in Tokyo.

Oh cool, I just interview him yesterday.

Yeah he's , I had seen both of those in a very short time period and back then there was no internet or anything so my mom made sure I witnessed, actually I remember watching on tv, Alwyn win gold and then I remember seeing the movie and thinking 'That's what I want'. It was something that was a potential reality because my mom said I was already showing signs, I had the physical talents to do it.

Ummhmm, ok, who were the people that supported you the most on your journey?

Definitely my mom, and my sisters. Everything was always a team effort and you know, I had support from other people. I had support from Alwyn, but that was later on, later in my career when I was already on the National team. Early on, it was definitely my mother, it was definitely her and just my older sisters being good role models because I remember them being really accomplished. One is a medical doctor and the other one has her PHD.

Oh wow.

They were both athletes.

Nice.

And they're both mothers. One has 6 kids and one has 4 kids.

Wow.

Yeah they took what they learned from sport and they applied it to different areas.

And then my little sister who is an actor, she has taken what she learned in sport and applied it to her field which she's doing really well in.

Nice. Okay what were you're biggest distractions or challenges that you faced as an athlete on your journey?

Well there's a lot of preconceived notions about Native people and, in the athletic world, that I faced early on because I chose sports, especially competitive swimming, where there were not really that many Native people doing it. So for a lot of people, I was the first Native person they've ever met in the flesh and just a lot of things that were racist attitudes towards athletes that we were gifted, very talented athletes but we were lazy that we were queers, that we were hard to coach, you know, all these things and it was hard hearing that. And I heard that from parents, from other athletes and I heard that as young as 8, 9 years old. And that's why having my mother there, kind of counter-balanced that. She really made sure that she showed me success stories such as Alwyn and Billy and the Firth sisters and Angel Tomers, and all these athletes. She made sure that I knew who they were and knew that we aren't quitters and that

there are very accomplished Native athletes out there. But it was hard because it sticks with you. It sticks with you very much so and I think from you know, I started my athletic career in Ottawa but coming back home to my community, a lot of the lateral violence, a lot of that stuff as I got older about being, 'oh Native girls don't lift weights, Native girls should have long hair. You know, you're acting white.' All the criticisms that you get and sometimes you get them from people that are very close to you. It's really, really hard.

Yeah, definitely.

It's hard because these are people that you don't expect that from, you know. But also, on the flipside, I had a lot of people that were supportive as well. I had both. You know, and then there's going through the Oka Crisis and going through a very traumatic experience at a young age. Ummm, I suffered from post traumatic stress disorder afterwards, and not knowing what to do with that. Not knowing how to deal with that, that really impacted my athletic career because it was kind of like a self medication strategy.

Ummhmm.

It was good but it didn't deal with a lot of the underlying issues. And then there was racism, there was always, you know, because at the elite level of sport, there's not that many Native athletes there either and I'm not exactly a wall flower. I'm very outspoken and I'm very proud of who I am. It was hard because I never really fit into the elite sport world and then suddenly I wasn't really fitting in my community either because you change by your world view, by who you are kind of evolve with your experiences and all of the experiences you have. So it was kind of a tough situation to be in and try and maintain a sense of identity and that kind of stuff. You know I talk a lot about athletes. There is Aboriginal athletes that make the Olympics but not many that come from the Aboriginal context, from the rez, from Northern Winnipeg, predominately Native which houses all the social and historical issues that we have to deal with, our reality and a part of our identity and when you're trying to make the National team or the Olympics, it's the historical and mental baggage that impact you or inspire you depending on how you are able to deal with it so that was probably the hardest part was trying to figure out how to turn that into a motivating force rather than something that was going to eventually you know eventually stop me so I had to learn how to be comfortable in being sort of caught between those two spaces.

Ok so next we'll talk about one of your best performances. Can you describe to me one of your best ever performance or games I guess I should say.

I can say one of my best experiences first. I think my best experience playing water polo, one of them would be playing for Carleton University and it was more because of the team environment and the coaching and it was a really, even though I was on the National team at the time, and I was on the playing with girls that were just learning how to play the sport of water polo. It was like, I mean, not everybody, but there were some really good athletes on my team as well, there was a wide variety of skill sets at that time, it was the team environment that I loved, and whether we became you know, university champions or whatever, it was a really great environment for me. And the coach of the team was a guy named Steve Barrage, and I think he's still the coach there. He was really good at creating a team environment and he was a great guy. He was my first, he was one of my first water polo coaches when I was like 13 or 14 years old. Getting to play for him was great.

But on like sort of a simply skilled, how I played, I think one of the best games I've ever had, challenging was probably the Pan Am games 99, the gold medal games, and I scored 3 goals, that was a good game. And then at the Olympics again, our games against the American's where we tied, I scored 3 goals again, that was probably one of the best games I've ever played.

Okay, for one of your best performances, one that you just mentioned, did you train differently or did you plan, prepare, rest or focus or do anything differently leading up to your great performance?

No, I just trained, like, wait a second. Pan Am games was in Winnipeg. So it was a little bit of a different context, environment, it was in Canada. It was, there was a certain element of, because for so long, all my competitions were international so I was really off somewhere else in the world doing it. This time I was home, it was somewhere where there was Native people. I remember during the opening ceremonies, there were Native dancers that escorted each team in, which was really cool. So yeah that was maybe different, that environment. But training physically? No we just trained like 6 hours a day, like dogs. And the Olympics, no I remember the morning before I played, I had a game that was early afternoon, I got to meet Muhammed Ali, which was one of my all time heroes.

Nice!

But other than that, physically, we just, nothing was really different.

Do you have any pre-game rituals?

I try not to. I tried really hard not to have rituals because once I started to see myself getting into rituals, I stopped myself and that was because it would be a negative impact on your mental game if something didn't go in exact order because athletes are very superstitious people. They put on their same socks the same way, they do all that crazy ass shit, like the play off beard and all that crazy kind of stuff. I tried really hard not to do that. The only thing that I did do was probably, and this wasn't if I couldn't do it, I wouldn't freak out, but I always tried to smudge, somehow.

Tried to what?

Tried to smudge, either with sweetgrass or tobacco. That was something I tried to do as much as I could but if I didn't, I would say thank you and be okay with it. Because that's how I was raised. I was raised traditionally by my mother and it wasn't always like the church, you know, where you always have to perform things in certain orders. You know, when you can, you do it. When you can't, you say thank you and you prepare so, but no I didn't have, I tried not to have any rituals. I liked music a lot. I'm a big fan of music. The one thing at the Olympics that I did do was listen to the same playlist while I was stretching but it wasn't dependent, I didn't depend everything on it.

Okay, so, but you stretched before every game, as part of your team?

Oh yeah, we stretched and warmed up as a team.

Okay

I mean we do stuff before a game that is, you mentally think about, you've had our team meetings so we know, I had a match up, I sit there and I think about the person that I'm matched

up defensively or you know, what's the game plan, what's the strength's, the weaknesses. But you're going over all of that. But as far as what I think is a ritual is more like, I have to put my clothes on in the same order, that for me is more ritualistic. More regular game preparation is just having gone over in your head and talked about.

That's leading into my next question which is, what were you focusing on at the start of your performance?

You know what I always did right before, because I was the co-captain at the Olympics. So I used to see myself, the stress of just being at the Olympics, the stress of the crowd, the stress of the media, the stress of the venue. My team was obviously starting to get very nervous and I remember having a conversation with a teammate, 2 years before that. She was like 33 at the Olympics and I was 24. I remember sitting in a team meeting and the coach was would be going over a video and I would be watching it and taking like meticulous notes over and over and you could dissect a game to death right and she's sitting there drawing pictures, counting how many times the coach said the umm word or paused and I'm looking going 'oh my god, you're not taking notes', and she looks at me and she goes, 'Waneek, I've been playing this game for like 20 years. It's not that complicated. You have a certain amount of defense and a certain amount of offenses, the rest you have to be instinctual by my age. And I remember thinking, wow, like, it's true, you do it over and over and over and over again. How many different ways can you block a ball? Do you know what I mean?

Ummhmmm.

At some point you have to stop thinking about it. And the other point you have to start doing, letting your body naturally do it. It transcends from a cognitive kind of functioning to become part of your ingrained nature, to play, to let loose that natural talent and that's what she's trying to tell me. She was very gifted. She was a really amazing athlete. I remember I used to be always blown away by, oh my god, how did she know shoot then? Or how did she know how to drive then? Or how did she know how to do that? Instinctively she just stopped thinking about it and she just did it. You know when you're at the Olympics, you have to be at the point where you're just doing it. That's when you see the Jordans and the, all these people and you're like, 'holy crap they took a chance and it paid off' and oh my god, they just stopped thinking. And so, I really thought about that when I was at the Olympics and said what makes me my most confident? When am I playing at my best? And it was usually was when I was having fun and laughing so I kind of tried to get like that before games. You know my teammates were looking at me and I would be cracking jokes and that kind of stuff and just saying you know, its all in there and I just have to have faith and say that all those years of training are going to pay off because this is what I trained for and it's all in there because you can't over-think it.

Ummhmm, umm..

Live in the moment, be in the moment, play in the moment. Don't try to play a minute ahead, play in the moment and that's what I tried to do.

Would that be during your performance as well, during your game as well?

Yes because like the death of you is when you're in a game and down 3 goals and you only have one quarter left and you're thinking 'oh my god'. You know you start thinking about losing, we're losing. You know, bored in 5 seconds as were watching the Stanley Cup playoffs and you

watch teams that are leading 4 to 1 and there's 2 minutes left in the game and teams come back and beat them and you're like 'what the hell?' and teams can come back even by big margins in the matter of minutes. You have to still maintain the ability to stay in the moment and keep your mind focused in the moment and what you can do right at that moment and not let yourself get sucked into thinking 'Oh my god, we're losing' or whatever.

So what about distractions, you always seem to go into my next question. Yeah because how would you deal with that distraction if you thought, oh no, we're losing, how do you eventually overcome that?

I think it's a matter of maturity and self-talk. Like you just have to teach yourself to do that, It's not something that comes naturally because I think what people naturally do is they, in order to mentally be able to deal with a situation, especially a high stress situation like competing at the Olympics or whatever. You think, 'I need to prepare myself for failure you know.

Ummhmmm.

And so you subconsciously do that. I need to be okay with it. You need to either really buckle down and get into the moment and I mean, it's easier when you're actually playing. You know what I mean?

Ummhmm.

I used to like, when I saw my teammates getting into a certain way, I would really get into pumping them up and be like no, let's do this now. Lets play this game for the next 30 seconds, we are on defense. Let's shut them down, lets steal the ball. You know, like, I would be screaming at them because I would be basically telling myself that. So I would try to really harden up, and that was only something I was able to do as I got older.

Oh okay. So experience then?

Yes experience and just getting it, getting what it means, getting what living in the moment means, getting what's happening in that moment and the energy that exists in that moment and playing your game in the moment.

So how are things going for you at this point in your life, like you're not in your sport anymore and you've been out for so many years? So where is your focus center at this point in your life?

I have a much harder job right now. I have a 3 year old and I'm just about to give birth to another baby. My husband is in medical school and he's been away for three years so I'm pretty much doing it on my own and I'm living in my community which has it's pluses and negatives as you well know and just trying to, I'm doing a lot of public speaking, I'm doing a lot of work with youth and I'm starting grad school in September at Carleton.

Oh wow, congrats. You're moving to Ottawa?

Yeah, I want to do, kind of doing something similar so I'll probably be using your thesis, basically, but I want to look at Indigenous motivation psychology.

Cool, that's going to be really interesting.

I really want to look at all of the historical, cultural and social and economic issues that are

affecting our motivation and because that's what I speak about when I speak. I speak a lot about, but I really want to get further into it and really kind of want to delve into the academic and philosophical side and you know, look at how we can create strategies to combat that because the fact that people think that we are the half ass nature in which a lot of times is the way in which, you know and only Native people can say this but it's true. I caught myself doing it as well because it's the way we approach things because a fear of failure, a fear of success, whatever it is, that's creating this culture of fear of pushing ourselves and that kind of stuff is not our Indigenous state. Our Indigenous state is we come from a very high performance people. They had no other choice. They couldn't be any other way because of the world in which they lived in and they lived in a world of natural selection where if you were lazy, if you were stupid, you know, anything, you pretty much died off because of war, disease and famine, you couldn't be anything less than you're high performance self in order to survive. So how do we get back? How do we tap into that and get our communities because I don't know if you participated in any of the Idle No More stuff but I was protesting that stuff 25 years ago as a teenager. We know what the problems are but what are the issues that make it happen? There are a lot of issues in our community that we ourselves have meet the challenge to fix. We need to stop our women from getting murdered. We need to stop our people from hurting each other. We need to do all these things, it's not fair and we know now why we are like that. No white people or no Native people can come into our community and say 'You need to treat each other better. And stop all this lateral violence it's bullying. No one is going to fix it for us so we need to fix it ourselves and so it's like I want to look at a lot of that because that's the environments that I'm being asked to speak in.

I like the way you refer to the Indigenous state as high performance and I'm definitely going to use that.

Yeah you should because and if you think about, you see pictures of our ancestors and if you think about the world like even a hundred years ago, even 50 years ago. Even 30, 40 years ago, like I know in Kitigan Zibi, you guys have a lot of iron workers coming from there and coming from here. We were high performance, we had no choice or we starved. You know, our kids didn't, like I remember for my second child, I was like, do I have a baby shower for this baby? And all my friends are like, yes you do. And all my non Native friends were like, you don't need one, you have everything you need. All my cousins and all the Native friends were like, yes because you know what, we all remember when our children died. Everything that survived and its true we did live in that environment and it wasn't that long ago where and you know, we talk about residential schools and we talk about what those impact-ers were and our communities were very impoverished so I think that its changing the view and its changing the look and the lens and all that kind of stuff and I'm really interested in it because I want to know if I'm talking out of my ass or not. Like because I've been public speaking forever and I want to write a thesis, I want to publish it and that kind of stuff. So to get more and more of that stuff out there. Like when I heard of you doing your thesis on what you're doing, I mean there's not, I don't know of anybody else that's looking at that. I mean there's a lot of people doing research on suicide or resiliency but specifically on strategies on success and that kind of stuff is hard to find.

Yeah actually I just presented my thesis at McMaster University and that's what a lot of people said during my questioning and all, that there's hardly anything on this topic on something positive and I was really encouraged.

It's always on the negative, it's always on what's wrong. You can find tons on what's wrong. I know at McGill they have the resiliency in the Mechel house. They've been doing studies on the resiliency other than why people commit suicide, is why they don't commit suicide.

Wow.

So there's been quite a few people doing research for them but you should look into and see if they have anything online to utilize.

Yeah I will.

It's really cool. I'm not sure who's heading it up anymore but I'm pretty sure that they did a very long study on it.

Ok we'll get into the next section, it's the negative questions now. It's funny, we're always talking about the next questions before they come. These next couple of questions talk about your less than best performances. Can you think of one of your less than best or most disappointing competitions and why that competition was not a great competition for you?

Oh the Olympics. It was disappointing not to win a medal. It was really hard. It was a lot of expectations, a lot of media attention, and then just personally to just not achieve what you put your mind too, it's really really hard. Everything about being in team sports, you could have the best game of your life and still not win a medal.

The Olympics, the whole thing in general, was just really hard but really amazing.

Yeah, you're right, when you talk about team sports, its different because you have to think about your teammates and stuff. But do you think during that performance, do you think you did anything differently, like why do you think it was disappointing for you, like was the focus somewhere else?

It's just team sports, I mean, the Olympics is, people who win gold are the ones that have all the elements, including a little bit of luck, all lined up. All the stars are shining. You know, the physical, the team cohesiveness, the coaching has to be, you know, all these elements have to line up for the things to, you know Olympic medals are very hard to win. Every athlete will say there's a little bit of luck.

Yeah that's true, everyone says that.

Some luck but there's always a little bit.

Did you have any distractions or negative thoughts during that performance?

Yeah, I mean yeah, there's always negative. Like there were interpersonal issues on my team that were never dealt with prior to the Olympics and they ended up rearing their ugly head there.

During the Olympics?

Yeah, I mean the stress was on. Your true colors show. I mean there were coaching issues. Our coaches were quite abusive so their stress levels went up and it was that.

Okay

There was a documentary if you ever want to watch it, it was done by Telequebec or supported by Telequebec. It was done in French. It's called Low Down Bouche. They followed our team

for 2 years. It's in French but all my stuff is in English. They followed us for 2 years and at the Olympics and you could see it. It was a really good film.

Yeah I will definitely check that out.

Ok we'll move on to advice. Yeah because you live in your community right now so what do you think could be done in your community right now to help other young people or developing athletes achieve the high levels of performance excellence that you achieved?

I think that there needs to be an intentional long term athlete development strategy developed not only in my community but across the country. I think there needs to be a strategic approach to develop our athletes. I think we need to develop our coaches, not just people who volunteer their time, but people who, like in Europe, that's what they do, that's their job. Because what happens now, is you burn people out and you know recreation directors are everything and anything when it comes to sport and we have to look at sport as something that is not an extracurricular activity but actually as a community building tool and it's not just about creating Olympic athletes, it's not just about creating only high performance, there needs to be room for everybody to play sports, whether you're gifted or not. Because everybody needs to move, everybody can learn from sport. Everyone can fun in sport. Everybody wants to belong, everyone wants to feel a part of something. When I talk about a long term athlete development strategy, I kind of see every person as an athlete for life. If you can develop those skill sets and levels of play, level of sport in a person, they can be an athlete for life whether they are going to the Olympics or going for a 5k walk or something but we need to get our people seeing themselves as lifelong athletes so that needs to be an intentional program in our community.

Ummhmm. That's a great vision.

What do you think that you have learned in your sport that you are applying or can apply to other area in your life?

Perserverance. Its been, you know, sport and physical activity is my anti-depressant. It's my self confidence booster, it's who I am. I really go to that when I need it and it's a big part of my life, sports and the people I've met through sport, the places I've been. You know I met my husband, he's a fourth? in Judo so I've gotten a lot through sport, really have. But you know I can't even begin to explain how amazing it was and the fact that I get to, it's given me a platform to share my stories, to share my vision, to work in the areas that I'm working in. As the sport ambassador for the Assembly of First Nations, that's something that's a true honour to be able to work in that field is really an honor. To get to speak to Indigenous people all over the place is really amazing.

What advise do have for young First Nations athletes who want to become great performers in their chosen sport?

I think that they have to be prepared to go above and beyond. It's not what little you can do. You have to do more. Native athletes have to be, you have to be better than you're non-Native competition. That still exists, you have to twice as good as everyone else because not only are you fighting stereo-types about our people, but you're fighting those inside yourself as well. Your fighting, and be prepared for it to be hard, tough, grueling work to get where you want to go. But that what defines you as well. That ooooh hard grueling work is something that you can be proud of as well. You know what I mean?

Ummhmm.

People think everything's easy. The instant 100 percent return on our investments in something that, like, is only recent. We want instant gratification. I want you to answer my text message instantly or else. You know what I mean.

Ummhmm

You need to see, like people don't understand that I'm as an Olympic athlete, minimum of 10 years. It's a minimum of 10 years of training day in and day out, away from your community, away from your family, focusing 100% on what you're doing, no drugs, no alcohol, no partying. You know like it's, you are really on a life journey, it's totally encompassing. But it's not going to be forever, that's the thing about sports. You will return. The best advice I ever got was when I was missing home I felt bad and whatever, 'Waneek, we're not going anywhere. We'll be here. Kahnawake is not going anywhere. And it's true. And be prepared to have changed through that process. Parents and family and friends have to understand and have to be able to recognize how hard it is for an athlete and try to give them support and know that there is a time, and I know that a lot of high performance athletes that I've spoken to that are Indigenous, have gone through very dark depression, very bad depression. Because it's almost like you're being re-born into this gray area. You have to be okay with just floating between two worlds. To have support from family, you know I was lucky to have a mother and sisters who kind of were going through the same thing in their area so we could identify with each other. Whatever success they see, I would hope that, it is, they have given 150% whether it's Olympic gold, whether it's varsity basketball, know that you have done absolutely everything in your power to achieve whatever the top of your mountain was and that you didn't cut yourself short out of fear or being worried about not fitting in at home or whatever. Because at the end of the day, that's when you can really just say that I did absolutely everything in my power to be the best athlete I could be. When I went to the Olympics it was the hardest experience of my life. But I know that there was nothing more I could have done. Absolutely nothing. Physically, mentally, emotionally, I couldn't have done anything else. And that, I was able to walk away from that experience proud and I didn't win a medal but I was proud because that was the top of my mountain. And I want more of our young people to feel that and not be afraid to push themselves and lay it all out there. Because at the end of the day, you know, they can be proud and then there is life afterwards which is awesome. Being a parent is amazing, you know, being a friend, being a sister, being an aunty, all these things are incredible. And yeah, the Olympics is intoxicating and being a great athlete is amazing but what has really made my life full and rich are all those other experiences. I mean yeah the Olympics experience is amazing and I use that to impact a lot of things but in the end, I think being a mother for me is it. There's nothing that can compete with that. So what I'm trying to say is, don't worry, the world will not end! There's a huge world out there with a whole bunch of other successes and experiences so don't be afraid to lay it all out there and push yourself and live in the moment. Enjoy what you're going through and achieve and enjoy that achievement and all those things. Because in the end, you'll, hopefully, you'll bring them home, to the community and share them with other people and use it to improve and enhance the community, the whole.

Ummhmm, well that was the last of my questions then. Is there anything else you would like to add?

No, I can't think of anything.

Ok well there's a couple of questions that I wanted to ask you just looking over my notes. Why did you get kicked off the Olympic team?

Because I spoke out about the coaches abuse and got them fired.

Oh okay.

And then we both lost as in any small sport world. But I look back and I would do it again. Because I was one of the only veterans, because after the Olympics, there's a lot of depression that happens after the Olympics, there's lots, especially if you don't achieve with what you set out to achieve and so the abuse got worse and a lot of my other veterans on the team went to Europe and played professional and I was one of the only ones that stayed home and it just got worse and worse and worse and I saw it happening and so where I'm from and how I was raised, and I come from a family of a long line of War Chiefs and my great grandfather was one and I remember talking to my mom about what to do and she said, because I was being told by teammates and other veterans, 'don't worry, just keep your head down and whether it and it's not you' and I said, that's not being part of a team. Being part of a team is worrying about your teammates and so my mother said, 'Well, those are like your sisters and you don't do nothing. We come from a line of War Chiefs and we don't do nothing' And so no I spoke out. I got the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport to do an investigation. I wasn't the only one. There were other players as well and they came in and did an investigation and told the Water Polo Canada Board if you don't fire these coaches, you will be criminally liable for putting these players in jeopardy. And then my career lasted maybe six months more.

Oh wow.

Except I would do it again, because at that point it was a measure of what are you willing to do. What are you willing to sacrifice in order to go to another Olympics. Are you willing to sacrifice your integrity and how you see yourself? Or are you going to... and I just couldn't do that and hold my head high and say my name is Waneek and this was and I was raised this way. There's a point where your values and your goals and your values outweigh it and that's yourself image right.

Ummhmm.

It's really funny because I was talking recently to someone about it and Muhammed Ali, when he refused to go fight in Vietnam and he went to jail for two years, that was at the height of his career.

Yeah.

That's when he was making tons of money and was everything, the best boxer in the world. And I thought how utterly amazing that he did that. Like his values were more important than his athletic career.

Yeah definitely.

Okay one last question, what made you play for Carleton?

Oh well, I played for Ottawa as a teenager and we used to always go and practice with the Carleton team and I automatically wanted to play for them.

Oh okay.

And maybe I might just dust off my bathing suit when I get into grad school. It's going to be painful, I know it.

Yeah definitely. Ok well thank you so much for your time Waneek.

No problem.