

# The 1904 Fort Shaw Girls World Champion Basketball Team: Sport Public Relations, Counterhegemony, and Native Athletes

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## Abstract

In 1904 a girls' basketball team from Montana's Fort Shaw Indian School became the World Basketball Champions at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (also known as the St. Louis World's Fair). This paper analyzes the events surrounding their win and argues two things. First, the team's experiences provide early examples of sport public relations that helped promote the team to a national audience. Second, the girls' participation in basketball served as a form of counterhegemony that helped the girls resist the brutality of the Indian School experience. Ultimately, this paper centralizes the role of Native women athletes through a historical example to answer the call for more case studies focusing on how public relations efforts can help subaltern communities defy hegemony.

**Keywords:** *Native athletes, Counterhegemony, Subaltern communities, Basketball, Fort Shaw*

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On April 1, 2024, over 12 million people watched Iowa's women's basketball team beat Louisiana State University on their way to the women's NCAA final four. The game peaked at 16 million viewers and beat viewership records for the 2023 World Series and all 2023 NBA Finals games, except one (Islam, 2024). The NCAA women's final drew 18.9 million viewers making it the most watched basketball game in five years for both men and women at the collegiate and professional level (Cobb, 2024). Women's

basketball is in its heyday. According to Susie Piotrkowski, the vice president of ESPN's and espnW's women's programming, "This isn't a moment in time. It's a movement" (as cited in Cobb, 2024, para. 3).

Similar to all movements that seemingly come out of "nowhere," the power and excitement around women's basketball has been growing since James Naismith invented the game in 1891. However, 120 years before the explosion in

popularity and viewership, a group of 10 Native girls from Fort Shaw, Montana were crowned Basketball Champions of the 1904 World's Fair. This paper analyzes the events surrounding their win and argues two things. First, the team's experiences provide early examples of sport public relations that helped promote the team to a national audience. Second, the girls' participation in basketball served as a form of counterhegemony that helped the girls resist the brutality of the Indian School experience. While indigenous youth at Fort Shaw were separated from their families, faced physical abuse, and dealt with a multitude of psychological and physical harms in the name of assimilation, the girls basketball team helped to resist the strictures of their educational environment and "took advantage of the movement afforded by their chosen sport to bend the cage of their campus" (Miles, 2023, p. 89). Ultimately, this paper centralizes the role of Native women athletes through a historical example to address Anderson's (2023) call for more case studies focusing on how subaltern communities can use public relations to defy a hegemony.

## Literature Review

### *Native Athletes and Sport Culture*

Indigenous and Native peoples, much less female Native athletes, are rarely mentioned in sports media and sport communication research. The research that has been done is almost exclusively focused on mascots (e.g., Billings & Black, 2018; Laveay, Callison, & Rodriguez, 2009; Whiteside, 2016) or Indigenous populations in countries outside the United States (Cleland, Adair, & Parry, 2022; Latino, Giles, Rynne, & Hayhurst, 2022). Research in the leading journals on communication and sport (i.e., *Communication & Sport*, *International Journal of Sport Communication*) rarely mention Indigenous and Native peoples, much less female Native athletes.

Sport culture, while anchored in shared beliefs and experiences, is always changing and being reimagined through the interactions and experiences of the participants in the culture (Hubka, 2024). The fluid nature of sport positions it as a site of competing tensions often creating a dynamic between sport as a positive endeavor and sport as a site of hegemony.

Native athlete representations exist on a similar continuum between pride and ethnic identity on one end and racist stereotypes on the other. King (2005) notes that "racism and anti-Indianism have been central to dominant interpretations of Native American athletes" (p. xxi). Sport, however, has also fostered ethnic identity and pride and provided a space where Native athletes could achieve symbolic revenge by beating other players and white teams (Bloom, 2000).

Historically, one place where Native athletes participated, and could feel the dueling tensions of "sport as pride" and "sport as racist," were at Indian Boarding schools. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, around 20,000 Indigenous youth attended a federal board school (Miles, 2023). The Carlisle Industrial School, a boarding school that served as a model for others, embraced sport and believed that Native athletic participation would elevate their public perception (King, 2005).

### *Subaltern Communities and Public Relations*

Fort Shaw was a former military post that became a boarding school in 1892 and was centrally located for tribes in Montana, Northern Wyoming, Eastern Washington, and Southeast Idaho (Twiggs, 2009). While government officials believed these schools provided valuable skills, recruiting tactics to have Native parents send their children were manipulative. Coercive measures included "trickery and partial truths to confuse parents and lure children, threatening to withhold food rations and annual treaty payments from families that did not comply, threatening physical force, and dispatching tribal police" (Miles, 2023, p. 76). Native parents and children were often separated and were at the mercy of the U.S. government's racist policies all in the name of "assimilation." History repeatedly shows the mistreatment and generational trauma Native communities have faced and Indian schools were one of the contributing factors.

Subaltern communities are communities that are marginalized, have no voice, have no power, and are inferior in society. Due to subjectivities such as race, gender, class, and age, these groups are "cut off from the mainstream platforms of civil society" (Dutta-Bergman, 2018, p. 383). At the core of subaltern studies is power, and subalternity is characterized by a lack of power (Beverly, 1999). Those that can exert influence and reinforce attitudes and values can maintain symbolic power, and this power has historically been maintained by the ruling classes (Anderson, 2023; Xifra & Heath, 2015).

Warrior (2011) notes that subalternity within North American Native communities exists in two major forms. The first is economic subalternity "that leads to weakened families, methamphetamine addiction, increased vulnerability to sexual and domestic violence, starvation, underemployment, and a host of other ills" (p. 91). The second form of subalternity is the maintenance of traditional cultural practices involving "a historical rejection of American power and values in [favor] of retention of older, indigenous forms of polity and sociality" (p. 91).

Subaltern studies allows for novel public relations research by documenting historiographies and narratives of marginalized communities (Spivak, 1988). Analyzing subaltern communities allows scholars to locate “agency in the subaltern participant and narrates stories of resistance and sense-making actively engaged in by subaltern people” (Dutta-Bergman, 2005, p. 287). Anderson (2023) argues that public relations efforts can help subaltern, or subordinate, groups confront a hegemony. He states that the “strategic use of persuasive communication and its ability to have an impact on meaning making could offer subaltern communities a way to confront hegemony” (para. 4). Subaltern groups may defy hegemonic messaging through three ways (Anderson, 2023). First, by taking advantage of a crises challenging the status quo. Second, by crafting a unified message that brings disparate groups together around a common frame that changes hegemonic frames. Third, using respected intellectuals to deliver the communication.

Subaltern communities, however, do not typically have access to, and have often been excluded from, mainstream communication outlets and knowledge production, so “alternative narratives that challenge structures of power wielded by dominant coalitions” can be used (Munshi & Kurian, 2020, p. 10). These types of alternative narratives extend beyond traditional communication efforts and can include “acts such as testimonio, protest marches, songs, dances, and blockades where subaltern groups articulate their voices through participation in communicative platforms” (Dutta & Pal, 2010, p. 378). This paper argues that sport, specifically the act of playing basketball, is another type of alternative communication that can challenge dominant power structures. Sport, after all, “fosters unique potential for resistive politics and social change” (Grano & Butterworth, 2019, p. 6).

### ***Sport Public Relations***

At the turn of the twentieth century, sport was growing considerably as professional leagues were established and collegiate sport grew. Public relations, while having long historical roots, was beginning to be used to promote sport strategically as a positive endeavor. One illustrative example was in 1892 when the University of Chicago, which had one of the first athletic departments in the country, organized a powerful public relations moment by bringing national powerhouse University of Michigan to Chicago for a football game on Thanksgiving day (Davies, 2017). A local media outlet reported: “For the last week nothing but football has been discussed at the University on the South Side” (as cited in Lester, 1995, p. 26).

The goal of any public relations effort is earned media – in other words, to have news outlets report on a person, event, or issue as news rather than as a promoted item from a self-serving publicist or organization. Modern sport public relations relies on mediated, traditional, digital, and in-person events to promote games and athletes. Non-mediated sport public relations approaches includes public speeches, personal appearances, promotional tours (such as caravans and exhibition games), clinics, and open houses. The advantages for non-mediated public relation efforts are that interactions are face to face, people who attend the events are usually predisposed and favorable to the people or organization, and an organization can exert a high degree of influence and control over the messaging (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012). At the turn of the twentieth century, several of these influential sports public relations tactics were used as the Fort Shaw girls started to play basketball and win.

### **Methodological Overview**

This paper utilizes a textual analysis of primary and secondary documents related to Fort Shaw’s girls’ team. Textual analysis relies on gathering and analyzing a text to make an educated assessment of the text’s likely interpretations. While there is no “correct” interpretation of a text, and there can be multiple interpretations, textual analysis can provide a way to make sense of it (McKee, 2001). Relevant secondary peer-reviewed historical documents were viewed providing an overview of the team’s experiences along with an analysis of primary newspaper media accounts found through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America database. Using the search term “Fort Shaw Basket Ball” (12 articles) and “Fort Shaw Girls” (57 articles) from 1903 to 1905, a total of 69 articles were analyzed to understand how newspapers across the United States reported on the team.

### **The 1904 Fort Shaw Girls World Champion Basketball Team**

Basketball, invented by James Naismith in 1891, became popular very quickly and served as a way to remain physically active inside during cold months. The game’s rules were reimagined by Senda Berenson with a set of “girls’ rules” that allowed women “to play basketball in a safer, more decorous manner” (Peavy & Smith, 2007, p. 822). Each girls’ team had six players split into different zones of the court. The two guards, two centers, and two forwards could not step outside of their zone, so the game was slowed down. However, many high school and college teams in the western part of the United States continued to play by the “boy’s rules” as it was faster and more exciting. In 1897, Josephine



Langley brought the game to Fort Shaw after learning it at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania and the girls played by the “boy’s rules” (Peavy & Smith, 2007).

The team had strong support to do well. The school’s second superintendent, Fred Choteau (F.C) Campbell, was a baseball player at the University of Kansas and was “well aware of the public-relations benefits of a strong athletic program” (Peavy & Smith, 2007, p. 822). Assuming the superintendent role in 1898, Campbell worked with students to teach them how to dribble, shoot, and play. By 1902, the team was good enough to play against other teams and Campbell set up a series of games against Sun River, which Fort Shaw easily won. Additional games were scheduled around the state and the more they played, the more fans came out. For example, at Montana Agricultural College in Bozeman, over 800 people showed up to watch, and in Missoula, the building filled to capacity. By the end of the 1902–1903 season, the team had nine wins and two losses, were the unofficial state champion, and had become “Montana’s team” (Peavy & Smith, 2005, p. 54). In May 1903, the director of the Model Indian School that would be part of the St. Louis World’s Fair, invited Fort Shaw students to attend. Campbell knew the girls’ team would be perfect participants. Their preparation for the World’s Fair, however, was not smooth.

As the 1903 school year started, and as Fort Shaw prepared to win another state championship, Montana organized a new basketball league including only official high school teams. This new league prevented Fort Shaw from participating and was believed to be because Fort Shaw was not accredited while others believed Fort Shaw was too good and no other teams in the state could compete (Peavy & Shaw, 2007). So instead of playing teams for the state championship, they participated in barnstorming events in the year leading up to the games and spent time preparing for the other exhibits they’d participate in at the exposition such as singing and theatrical performances (Peavy & Shaw, 2005).

The girls departed Fort Shaw in June 1904. The team was made up of 10 girls and the starting five represented four tribes: captain and guard Belle Johnson, a Piegan from Montana’s Blackfeet Reservation; forward Emma Rose Sansaver of the landless Chippewa–Cree; forward Minnie Burton, a Shoshone from Idaho’s Lemhi Reservation; and guard Genie Butch and center Nettie Wirth, both Assiniboine from Eastern Montana’s Fort Peck Reservation (Peavy & Smith, 2007). During the two week trip to St. Louis the girls played several exhibition games in Montana, stopping in Great Falls, Bozeman,

Livingston, Billings, Miles City, and Glendive. They had three more games in North Dakota and one in the Twin Cities before going south to St. Louis (Peavy & Shaw, 2005).

At the exposition, the girls lived at the Model Indian School. They studied and completed domestic duties during the day and played two exhibition games per week against each other and other Model Indian School students (Miles, 2023). They were also approached by two of the best girl’s programs in the area, Illinois’s O’Fallon High School and St. Louis’s Central High to play, which they accepted (Peavy & Shaw, 2007). In August, the girls participated in the “Special Olympics,” a set of events organized by the fair’s athletic director and head anthropologist, and played against each other in a high-profile game. Finally, in September, the girls began a two-out-of-three games series against the St. Louis All-Stars (also known as the Missouri All-Stars), a handpicked team many believed would be an exceptional opponent. Fort Shaw easily beat everyone they played. By the end of the World’s Fair, they were the basketball world champions (Miles, 2023).

## Implications

There are two implications for Fort Shaw’s participation at the 1904 World’s Fair. First, the team’s experiences provide early examples of sport public relations that helped promote the team to a local and national audience. F.C. Campbell used tactics that are understood by today’s sport PR practitioners as effective ways to promote teams. For example, Campbell set up exhibition games around Montana and in various states as the team traveled to St. Louis. Once they arrived in St. Louis, the team played additional games garnering the attention of thousands as people who attended the games, heard about them from word of mouth, or read about them in media outlets. Media outlets reported on the team from 1903–1905 in 69 articles in newspapers across the country. State coverage occurred in Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, California, Washington, Tennessee, Mississippi, Oregon, Arkansas, Utah, Missouri, Rhode Island, Hawaii, Ohio, Georgia, Iowa, and Vermont. There was variety among how the reporters covered the team. For example, some articles were more positive and described the team as “superior,” (“City and State,” 1903), some were relatively neutral as they discussed the team traveling (e.g., “Local and Personal,” 1904), while some used negative terms such as “dusky maidens” (e.g., “Play Fast,” 1904). However, the earned media in press outlets across the country for a women’s basketball team, specifically for Native women, was unmatched. Undoubtedly, the girls’ continual winning surely made people want to watch, but

Campbell's promotion of the team through non-mediated public relations tactics (such as the exhibitions), created opportunities to showcase Native athletes in an unprecedented manner.

The second implication is that the girls' participation in basketball served as a form of counterhegemony that helped the girls resist the brutality of the Indian School experience. Boarding school educators' assimilation tactics prevented students from using their native language and forced girls to wear dresses, learn domestic life of cooking and cleaning, and adhere strictly to gender norms of being a white woman at the turn of the twentieth century. Playing basketball, therefore, provided another experience for the girls outside of the structure and disciplinary expectations of the school. Their play challenged stereotypes about the physical limitations of women and what Native athletes could accomplish. According to Miles (2023):

*Being a boarding school athlete, like being a boarding school student, was a double-edged experience of accommodation and resistance. But along that knife's edge, the girls of Fort Shaw's team could recapture some of the outdoor freedom that young Native girls had enjoyed, as well as community regard for somatic mastery that Native women had earned over generations before them. (p. 95)*

While actively resisting was not recorded in historical documents, and surely would have had strong repercussions, there is evidence that the act of playing and being at the fair challenged the norms of the hegemonic boarding school life. At the exposition, the girls endured ignorance and rude looks from visitors who were shocked that the girls could iron. Once the visitors had moved into a different part of the school, the girls would mimic them (Peavy & Shaw, 2007). And at the end of the World's Fair, player Genevieve Healy wrote in teammate Emma Sansaver's memory book, "Darling Emma... All I ask of you is to remember N.J. and I as long as you can. Don't forget the good times we have spent in St. Louie. Your Friend [for] ever" (as cited in Miles, 2023, p. 110). The note communicates the collective triumph they felt and suggests the reaffirming experiences they had with each other while playing basketball.

## Conclusion

The legacy of the Fort Shaw girls' team has been passed down and still impacts people. In June 2024, descendants of players met in Great Falls, Montana in honor of the 120th anniversary (Murray, 2024). Their story is either a reminder, or a wake up call, depending on one's knowledge, of the long thread of sport

public relations, the role Native women have in basketball, and how subaltern communities can resist. It remains to be seen whether or not the popularity of women's basketball continues, but the Fort Shaw girls were a large part of this movement that started long ago on the vast windswept vistas of Montana with women finding joy in sport.

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