

10-28-2021

## Janice Forsyth, Reclaiming Tom Long Boat: Indigenous Self-Determination in Canadian Sport. With a Foreword by Willie Littlechild.

Vernon K. Wilson  
*University of Victoria*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/dlj>



Part of the [Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Vernon K. Wilson, "Janice Forsyth, Reclaiming Tom Long Boat: Indigenous Self-Determination in Canadian Sport. With a Foreword by Willie Littlechild." (2021) 44:2 Dal LJ.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Schulich Law Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dalhousie Law Journal by an authorized editor of Schulich Law Scholars. For more information, please contact [hannah.steeves@dal.ca](mailto:hannah.steeves@dal.ca).

---

## Book Review

---

Janice Forsyth, *Reclaiming Tom Long Boat: Indigenous Self-Determination in Canadian Sport*. With a Foreword by Willie Littlechild. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2020. 241pp.

Established in 1951, the Tom Longboat Awards seek to “recognize Aboriginal athletes for their outstanding contributions to sport in Canada.”<sup>1</sup> In her meticulous work of cultural history, the Cree kinesiologist Janice Forsyth places this official discourse in settler-colonial context. “The history of sport and physical activity in Canada,” she clarifies for sports scholars and administrators, “is not a history of empowerment or inclusion, or even of opportunity, accommodation, or amalgamation. Rather, it is a history of containment, control, and elimination.”<sup>2</sup> Forsyth’s incisive analysis consequently goes well beyond the fields of sociology and sport history. On my reading, her work makes major contributions to the respective fields of oblivion studies and Indigenous law.

Oblivion studies, a domain of inquiry within memory studies, is committed to exploring the crises and contexts that produce and maintain cultural oblivion in forms like “silence, omission, and repetition” whilst proposing explanations for why particular communities forget in these enigmatic ways.<sup>3</sup> One of Forsyth’s key findings is that the Tom Longboat Awards have failed to shift how Canadians see and understand Indigenous peoples or Indigenous athletes in sport. She attributes this lack of influence, in part, to “the silence surrounding the recipients’ stories.”<sup>4</sup> It is, in fact, one of the “most striking features of the awards.”<sup>5</sup> What makes the silence around the Tom Longboat Awards particularly acute is that, as Forsyth puts it, “the substance of the awards relies in large part on the continued excision of their stories.”<sup>6</sup> By this she means the organizers of the awards—and there have been many throughout its seven decade history, from the Department of Indian Affairs and the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada, to the Sports Federation of Canada and Assembly of First Nations, to the

---

1. “Tom Longboat Awards,” online: *Aboriginal Sports Circle* <[www.aboriginalsportcircle.ca/tom-longboat-awards](http://www.aboriginalsportcircle.ca/tom-longboat-awards)> [perma.cc/ZJP4-U9EG].

2. *Ibid* at 43.

3. Liedeke Plate, “Amnesiology: Towards the Study of Cultural Oblivion” (2016) 9:2 *Memory Studies* 143 at 148. For a case study in Canada, see Pierrot Ross-Tremblay, *Thou Shalt Forget: Indigenous Sovereignty, Resistance and the Production of Cultural Oblivion in Canada* (London: University of London Press, 2020).

4. Forsyth, *supra* note 1 at 170.

5. *Ibid*.

6. *Ibid*.

Aboriginal Sport Circle—have retained control over the various branding messages published about the awards. Were it not for these bureaucratic oversights and discourses, Forsyth argues that “more complex (to say nothing of truthful) versions of the recipients’ stories would mean that Canadians would have to take Indigenous stories, and therefore stories about Canada, more seriously.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, when we consider what the seven award recipients from Ontario that Forsyth interviewed for her research have to say, we discern these complexities and find further silences. For instance, Tara Hedican, a former world-class wrestler and the 2001 Tom Longboat national recipient from the Eabametoong First Nation, shares how she did not openly acknowledge her Indigenous heritage until she reached university. “I always felt uncomfortable,” Tara shares, “when people ask you what you are because I’m such a mixture of different things anyway.”<sup>8</sup> Forsyth adds that “not talking about it was her [Tara’s] response to racist thinking...similar to Phyllis Bomberry, who ignored the racist taunts on the ball field, for Tara, silence was a means to resist racist thinking.”<sup>9</sup> Forsyth’s provocative findings on the way silences surface in the Tom Longboat Awards reveal incidences of cultural oblivion. Accounting for this phenomenon in the area of Indigenous sports studies deserves further attention.

Forsyth’s research additionally casts light on an overlooked area in the field of Indigenous law.<sup>10</sup> Namely, the relationship between sports and Indigenous legal orders. Throughout her book, Forsyth details how the Canadian state systematically deployed sports as a tool of assimilation. As an example, she mentions how sports substituted in for Indigenous “religious customs” during the *Indian Act* ban, in place from 1885-1951.<sup>11</sup> The religious customs Forsyth refers to are the feast and potlatch ceremonies practiced by Indigenous peoples on the northwest coast of British Columbia.<sup>12</sup> While these ceremonies hold spiritual significance, they are more accurately understood as Indigenous legal institutions and governance practices.<sup>13</sup> As such, Forsyth’s concluding remarks about how sports award ceremonies occur in societies beyond Canada raise interesting

---

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid* at 165.

9. *Ibid* at 164-165.

10. For a helpful introduction to Indigenous law, see John Borrows, *Canada’s Indigenous Constitution* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010).

11. *Ibid* at 172.

12. *Ibid* at 87, 172, 174.

13. See e.g. Valerie Ruth Napoleon, *Ayook: Gitksan Legal Order, Law, and Legal Theory* (PhD Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2009) [unpublished] at 8.

questions about Indigenous societies and legal orders that continue to exist within Canada.<sup>14</sup> How have Indigenous legal orders historically acknowledged excellence in land-based fitness and how do they continue to do so today? What are the legal principles, processes, and procedures for ensuring and promoting fitness among Indigenous citizenries? Outside of state bureaucracies, who are the authoritative decision-makers in the area of Indigenous physical activity and sport? Answers to such questions are central to rebuilding sports culture *and* Indigenous legal orders today.

At the end of her book, Forsyth considers what future themes might be raised by award recipients in the twenty-first century. As an award-winner herself,<sup>15</sup> she takes the opportunity to call attention to the recent implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in British Columbia and the Northwest Territories.<sup>16</sup> In keeping with the Truth and Reconciliation's Calls to Action, she suggests this legal framework could "structure and guide the path moving forward."<sup>17</sup> It is here she reclaims Tom Longboat (1887–1949), the Onondaga Olympic marathoner from Six Nations of the Grand River, Ontario, suggesting the runner would himself be pleased with trekking such an arduous path.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, the degree to which award recipients raise the matter of Indigenous law in their acceptance speeches will signal the degree to which Indigenous athletes are running towards their own legal orders. And, in the enduring spirit of Longboat, it is worth keeping in mind that rebuilding Indigenous law in the aftermath and on-going realities of settler-colonialism is a marathon, not a sprint.

Dr. V.K. Wilson  
University of Victoria

---

14. Forsyth, *supra* note 1 at 171.

15. Forsyth won a Tom Longboat Award for her track and field performance at the 2002 North American Indigenous Games in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

16. Forsyth, *supra* note 1 at 185.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

