STORIES ABOUT SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT ACROSS CANADA

GOOD SPORT

THE J. W. McCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

La Fondation de la Famille J. W. McConnell

SILVER DONALD CAMERON
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .................................................................................................................................................. IV
Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. V
1. First Round: Boxing for the Seventh Generation .................................................................................. 1
2. Second Set: Sport, False and True .......................................................................................................... 5
3. Third Period: The Mad Cows of Winnipeg ............................................................................................ 11
4. Fourth Quarter: The Rights Game ......................................................................................................... 17
5. Fifth Hole: Links and Leadership ......................................................................................................... 23
6. Sixth Lap: Values Gone Viral ................................................................................................................ 31
7. Seventh Inning: Song of Peetaback ..................................................................................................... 37
Acknowledgements and About the Author ........................................................................................... 42
I grew up in Sault Ste. Marie where hockey was a big part of my life.

One day, I received a phone call from Mr. Taylor, who ran a sporting goods store across the street from the local rink. He asked me, “Would you come by the store before your game tomorrow? I’ve got something for you.”

I dropped by the following day. Mr. Taylor wasn’t a wealthy man, but he had put aside a brand new pair of skates for me.

At my young age, I had hardly ever seen a pair of new skates, let alone a brand new pair for me! I laced them up with pride and scored three goals that evening in front of a scout from the Toronto Maple Leafs who came to watch the game.

I’ve never forgotten that moment, not because of my hat-trick, but because of the lesson that Mr. Taylor taught me. It’s a lesson I’ve carried with me throughout my life – that the combination of good sport and caring individuals can bring us together in unique ways.

Stories like this one play out every day across this country, having an impact not only on our children but on our sense of belonging to our community.

The stories in Good Sport, encouraged through the leadership of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, remind us that the way we play together shapes how we live together. They reflect the courage and ingenuity of community leaders who have seen that the example of individual actions, like that of Mr. Taylor, could be the basis for bringing sport into the field of community development. And they highlight how contributions – both large and small - can have a profound impact on our lives and our ability to build a better Canada for us all.

I trust that, like me, you will find inspiration in the pages that follow and that you will draw upon this spirit in your own sporting way.

Yours in sport,

His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston
Governor General of Canada
Everyone loves the story of the underdog who manages to succeed despite adversity. As readers of this book will discover, the sport for development field is filled with them.

Sport for development is not a new idea, but its resurgence in Canada over the past decade is having profound impacts in rural and urban communities across the country. MoreSports in Vancouver; the Active Circle in Indigenous communities; Right to Play; and hundreds of small-scale initiatives launched with support from the True Sport Foundation, are among the new programs engaging young people, their parents, volunteers and community leaders in underserved and remote communities.

Why is this work important? Improved health and fitness, along with coaching and leadership training, contribute to youth’s social productivity – their ability to lead lives that make a net contribution to community. Counter to current trends that exacerbate the divide between rich and poor, sport for development is about creating a society where differences in income, race, and religion do not prevent social cohesion and mobility. It makes our communities more inclusive and resilient.

The Foundation’s Sport and Social Inclusion initiative has supported a portfolio of community sport and recreation projects. In addition, we have partnered with leading organizations to strengthen the sport for development movement – by creating a “Sport for Change” web platform, testing new business models, undertaking research, influencing government policy, and (unsuccessfully) challenging charity laws related to sport. This book is about the work that it has been our privilege to support.

To achieve continued productivity and prosperity, Canada must dramatically improve the prospects of children growing up in chronic poverty, and especially Indigenous youth, while integrating successive waves of immigrants. At a time when the influence of churches, service clubs and youth organizations is in decline, sport for development programs are essential tools for fostering personal development and community vitality.

We hope you enjoy the book.

John Cawley,  
Director of Programs and Operations  
Stephen Huddart,  
President and CEO
FIRST ROUND:
BOXING FOR THE SEVENTH GENERATION

Mary Spencer’s red-gloved fists fly out, her arms flickering like lightning. Jab-jab-jab: she blocks a right hook, counters with another jab. She’s dancing, dancing, light on her feet, fists blurring, one-two, one-two-three.

She’s 5’11”, 160 pounds, tuned like a violin. She’s a 10-time national champion, five-time Pan American champion, three-time world champion. She competed in the first women’s boxing matches in the history of the Olympics. She may well be the finest woman boxer her country has ever produced. Her aim is to crush her opponents – strike terror into their souls – and she is very good at what she does.

But today, she is hitting lightly, building the confidence and skill of her sparring partner. This boxing ring is not in Guadalajara or Qinhuangdao or London, but in Neyaashiinigiing First Nation, otherwise known as Cape Croker, on the shores of Ontario’s Georgian Bay. And her opponent, Halle Johnston, is eight years old.

“She’s fun, she’s cool and she’s awesome,” says Johnston.

Like Johnston, Spencer is Anishinaabe, or Ojibwa, and although she lives in Windsor, Neyaashiinigiing is her ancestral home – a beautiful place, surrounded by water, ringed with beaches. Every month, Spencer climbs into her silver pickup and drives five hours to Neyaashiinigiing to help the kids form a boxing club. Their club building has been approved, but it’s not constructed yet. So Spencer and the 20 kids spar on the beach and in the community hall. And they train: skipping rope, running down the sandy roads and paddling canoes together.

Spencer is a GEN7 Messenger, part of a small team of 22 accomplished Aboriginal athletes who have been trained in public speaking and facilitation by Motivate Canada, an Ottawa-based charity dedicated to improving the lives of young people by encouraging engagement, inclusion, social entrepreneurship and leadership.
For Motivate Canada, sport is both an end and a means. An active lifestyle is valuable in itself – but sport, properly structured, also combats depression and builds confidence, self-esteem and teamwork. So Motivate Canada recruits successful young athletes – like Spencer – to be inspirational role models.

Motivate Canada has other programs, but the GEN7 program is specifically directed toward Aboriginal youth, particularly those in remote communities. The name alludes to the native belief that healing the First Nations will take seven generations. It also reflects the seven sacred teachings of humility, respect, courage, love, wisdom, truth and honesty, as well as the concept that human decisions and activities should take into account the well-being not just of those who are living today, but also of the next seven generations.

Each GEN7 Messenger is paired with an Aboriginal community, and GEN7 Messengers visit their communities once a month for at least six months. They involve the youth in sports, identify opportunities for community development and develop connections with the community’s elders and other leaders. As occasions arise, they help the young people to take the lead on tackling the community’s issues, especially the unique challenges of Aboriginal youth.

Both on the reserves and in the cities, too many desperate young natives destroy themselves either slowly, by means of drugs and alcohol, or quickly, by taking their own lives. So, at a Toronto workshop for both youth and Messengers from a half-dozen reserves in Ontario, GEN7 workers provide sessions on suicide alertness and prevention, along with such proactive experiences as personal mapping (What have been the milestones in your life?) and community mapping (What does your community have, and what does it need?).

Each Messenger is expected to oversee the creation, by the youth, of a development project, all by themselves. At Neyaashiinigmiing, Spencer and “her” kids are organizing a beach volleyball tournament.

“Volleyball is huge here!” Spencer says. “A lot of the parents just love volleyball, and they’ve instilled it in the kids. I don’t know a kid here who doesn’t enjoy playing volleyball. It’s the main thing they want to do.” The Neyaashiinigmiing kids often play at tournaments in nearby Wiarton and Owen Sound; they’d like to bring those teams to a tournament on the reserve.

“Well, the court is already there,” Spencer says, “and it’s a beautiful view down there at the beach, with the bluffs in the background, and you’re at the park, where they have the campground. It’s a really cool location. So the kids want to run a tournament, invite some teams,
show off our volleyball court and our park, and use the money to do some maintenance on the courts.”

Our volleyball court. Our park. Spencer has been involved with Neyaashiinigmiing for three years now, far longer than the GEN7 project originally projected. She gets there when she can and, if she’s gone for a few months, “I’m filling them in, they’re filling me in, and we’ll do a lot of catch-up just by having sharing circles and stuff like that.” In between, there are emails and phone calls – “they’re all little BlackBerry users” – and many of the kids have actually visited her in Windsor.

As one GEN7 Messenger noted, such a sustained engagement between the visiting athlete and the community is very different from the fly-in/fly-out approach of many well-intentioned projects. For these kids, Spencer is now a trusted friend who has done something quite spectacular with her life. If she can do that, why not me?

For Spencer, the ripples and reverberations from her relationships with the kids are the measure of her success. A good leader, she says, “makes it so that things get done when they’re not even there.”

For Spencer, the ripples and reverberations from her relationships with the kids are the measure of her success. A good leader, she says, “makes it so that things get done when they’re not even there.”

Impressive though it is, the GEN7 program is only one fragment of a broad national movement to recapture the positive values of sport in building both character and community, to renew the role of sport in Canadian communities and to enhance the impact of sport on Canadian lives. To understand the origins of this movement, we need to revisit some sordid episodes in the history of Canadian sport, which prompted some hard, honest thought not only about sport and values, but also about the kind of nation that we want to leave for the next seven generations of Canadians of every situation and origin.
Here is Vancouver hockey player Todd Bertuzzi, punching Steve Moore from behind, pounding his head into the ice, breaking three vertebrae and ending Moore’s career. Mind you, Bertuzzi was retaliating for Moore’s assault on Vancouver captain Markus Naslund, which gave Naslund a concussion and chipped one of his bones.

Here are members of the International Olympic Committee, taking bribes in Salt Lake City – and in Japan, according to the governor of Nagano, receiving an “illegitimate and excessive level of hospitality,” including $4.4 million worth of “entertainment.” Here is Olympic figure skater Tonya Harding and her entourage, hiring a thug to break the leg of her leading rival, Nancy Kerrigan. Here is Mike Tyson, biting off Evander Holyfield’s ear in retaliation for Holyfield’s head-butt earlier in the match. Here is Mark McGwire, thumping out 70 home runs in a record-breaking season, and sopping up drugs throughout his career.

The top three sports stories of 2012, notes Paul Melia, President of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, were “the Penn State Sandusky scandal, the Lance Armstrong scandal and the NFL bounty scandal. In order: child molestation, doping and violence.” Armstrong’s scam was described by the BBC as “the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen.” One Canadian coach said it was “essentially organized crime.”

Ah, yes: sport moulds character – lying and cheating, doping and drugging, avarice, bribery, bullying, conspiracy, rape, assault and sabotage. The activity that gets into the sports pages is really just another big business, a form of entertainment, another forum in which the only rule that matters is “Don’t get caught.”

“What about the example that such sport sets for our children?” asks Florida sports columnist Dennis Maley. “The answer isn’t pretty,” he says, “but in truth, it probably sets an effective example of how to best
prosper in such a wicked society – cheat. If you want your children to learn better values,” he writes, “I’d suggest you take care to teach them yourself. Bring them up to find their heroes at home and in their community.”

About 28% of Canadian adults and 50% of children participate in sports. Yet sports organizations derive only 12% of their funding from government, as opposed to 49% for voluntary organizations overall.

That idea goes right to the heart of a fast-developing new field known as “sport for development,” of which the Cape Croker vignette is a good example. In fact, the dubious record of sport in moulding character is the point of origin for the Cape Croker story.

In 1988, Ben Johnson shocked Canadians by winning a gold medal at the Seoul Olympics – and having it immediately stripped from him because of his chemical cheating. That event led directly to the federal Commission of Inquiry into the Use of Drugs and Banned Practices, chaired by Mr. Justice Charles Dubin. Dubin’s report called for a national, independent, anti-doping organization, which emerged as the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport. CCES is dedicated to fostering ethical sport for all Canadians, using “a comprehensive approach that includes research; advocacy and promotion; prevention; policy development; and detection and deterrence.”

This is a huge national mandate, and, in practice, the CCES is focused on the urgent task of thwarting the bad guys by forestalling and penalizing their ever more ingenious methods of cheating. The list of “threats to sport” on the CCES website includes doping, violence, parents behaving badly, weak community sport governance, lack of access and inclusion, and negative behaviours in professional sport.

Overcoming unethical conduct in sport also means encouraging and promoting genuinely ethical conduct. In 2001, a conference of Canadian ministers responsible for sport met in London, Ontario to consider the growing concern that these same issues were infecting not only elite and professional sport, but also school and community sport. The ministers’ London Declaration laid out a number of specific principles flowing from the conviction that “ethics and ethical behaviour are integral to sport.”

But how do those principles get advanced? In 2002, a national survey organized by CCES confirmed that Canadians did indeed support them and, the next year, a broad cross-section of stakeholders – parents and kids, government officials, sports associations, Olympic champions – met for a symposium called “The Sport We Want.” Three strong messages emerged from the symposium. First, sport can indeed mould character positively by inculcating values such as fairness, excellence, inclusion and fun. That has been its social function all the way back to the original Olympics. Second, the negative values that were marring elite sport had also begun to affect community sport,
which had largely retained the original values of genuinely amateur sport – literally, sport for the love of it. Third, the country needed some kind of national initiative designed to help sport achieve its potential to build character and community.

That initiative became True Sport Canada, an alliance designed to foster sport for the joy of it, sport for participants rather than spectators, sport as an integral part of community life. True Sport Canada is supported by the federal and provincial/territorial governments as well as by thousands of clubs, teams, schools and communities. It describes itself as “a national movement for sport and community.” Its core mission is to be a catalyst to help sport live up to its full potential as a public asset for Canada and Canadian society.

In 2008, the CCES issued What Sport Can Do: The True Sport Report – the manifesto, almost, of the new domain of sport for development. The document reported some astonishing figures. Sport is present in almost every Canadian community. It includes 33,650 sport and recreation organizations, with 5.3 million volunteers – much more than any other sector. Of these, 1.8 million are coaches and 800,000 are referees or officials. About 28% of Canadian adults and 50% of children participate in sports. Yet sports organizations derive only 12% of their funding from government, as opposed to 49% for voluntary organizations overall.

But while 92% of Canadians thought that community sport could be a positive influence in
the lives of young people and 72% believed that sport was “a key contributor” to the quality of life in their communities, only 20% thought that the potential of sport was being fully realized. There was, True Sport concluded, “a growing gap” between the potential benefits that Canadians believed sport could provide and what they were actually experiencing.

Indeed, Canadians were abandoning sport in droves. Where 45% of Canadian adults had participated in sport in 1992, by 2005 only 28% were doing so. And the reasons, predictably, included the same old issues: too much emphasis on winning, too much (or too little) parental involvement, violence, harassment, lack of fair play, racism and injuries.

The report called on sports leaders to face the problems and incorporate positive values in what they did. Even more important, it called for the broader community – the private sector and all levels of government – to insist on intentional and strategic action to pull sport out of its silo and into the mainstream. Communities at all levels, the report argued, should demand that sport become a broad-based realm that would enrich the whole community by building social capital as well as physical health and wellness.

The whole concept of sport for development had captured the attention of people and organizations that were not particularly interested in sport, but were very concerned with creating healthy, productive and resilient communities. Although the True Sport organization was, and is, mainly about advocacy, its sister organization, the True Sport Foundation, is mandated to run actual programs and to engage in charitable activities, which a purely sports-oriented organization is barred from doing. So, the True Sport Foundation formed substantial partnerships with Bell Canada, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation to support “initiatives that promote access and inclusion in sport.”

The first result was the Bell Community Sport Fund, financed by a $3 million grant from Bell Canada. This initiative operated from 2005 to 2007 in the four provinces served by Bell Canada – Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. Its grants to community sport and recreation groups did promote access and inclusion, but they were aimed primarily at hockey and soccer programs serving youth between the ages of 4 and 17. Over the three years, 396 communities received funding, touching the lives of more than 238,000 children and youth and 25,000 volunteers.
Meanwhile, the partnership with Ontario Trillium Foundation allowed the True Sport Foundation to expand its influence by supporting True Sport Animators to promote, establish and implement a variety of positive community initiatives first in eastern and northern Ontario, and later throughout the province.

In addition, starting in 2006, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation began a sequence of grants, which ultimately totalled $2.5 million, to provide support for community sport initially in the six provinces and three territories that were not covered by the Bell Community Fund, and later throughout the country.

McConnell, says John Cawley, the Foundation’s director of programs and operations, got involved because it recognized that sport had “a powerful impact on the physical, social, psychological health of individuals, and on the resilience of communities, but the benefits of sport were not reaching many of the people who needed it the most.” Wealthy communities can afford facilities, coaching, transportation and all the other supporting infrastructure for sport, but poor communities cannot.

So – like the Bell Fund – the McConnell Foundation grants focused on Aboriginal, new Canadian and low-income youth between the ages of 4 and 17. Unlike the Bell Fund, however, it supported all kinds of sports activities. In the first four years, using an initial McConnell grant of $1.89 million, the True Sport Community Fund awarded a total of 175 grants, benefiting more than 93,000 children and youth and 10,000 volunteers. The grants were dedicated to supporting sport as a means of strengthening leadership development and social networks within and among communities.

In a sense, the McConnell-supported True Sport Community Fund was an extensive pilot project. It assisted community sport in a variety of ways – upgrading infrastructure and making capital improvements, acquiring equipment, doing innovative programming, providing funds that could be used to lever additional funds, and so forth. But it was also designed to mobilize volunteers, create social networks, expand the number of communities with a commitment to the True Sport principles and increase the number of volunteers working in community sport. In addition, it prompted communities to develop cooperative relationships among such stakeholders as associations, sports groups, administrators, educators, the police and others.

The True Sport Community Fund also had a research component. It analyzed and recorded the effectiveness of various approaches to using sport for community development purposes – and its findings would help to guide later efforts to promote social inclusion through sport.

And now, finally, it is possible to go down onto the courts and playing fields and actually see sport for development going on, with real people playing real games in real communities.
THIRD PERIOD:  
THE MAD COWS OF WINNIPEG

At six in the bone-chilling darkness of a midwinter Winnipeg morning, Chino Arguete is navigating a 15-passenger van through one of Canada’s poorest neighbourhoods, picking up little basketball players.

A wiry, smiling soccer player from Guatemala, Arguete is the Sports Coordinator for the Spence Neighbourhood Association, and, at this moment, he is substituting for a whole bunch of dads. In the plump suburbs – where these micro-athletes are about to play – doting parents buy sports equipment and uniforms, pay league registration fees, drive the kids to practices and games. But Spence is a neighbourhood of single mothers, immigrant parents working two jobs each, large families in cramped quarters, addicts, gangs and the mentally ill. Nobody here has time even to wonder whether the kids would benefit from playing basketball or soccer. So the Association fills in, treating the kids as if they mattered, showing them how to work together, doing all the things a dad would do – if a dad were available.

The Spence Neighbourhood Association was originally about housing, not sport. And as the housing stock improved, it was about preventing vandalism and petty crime. Because many of the miscreants were young, the Association created a powerful set of youth programs. As in other inner-city neighbourhoods, Spence’s youth, left largely to their own devices, had organized themselves into gangs, recruiting largely from the two most marginalized groups, young newcomers and Aboriginals. Some of the gangs, such as the African Mafia, belonged to just one ethnic group – but others evolved very differently.

“This is Mad Cow territory, and the Mad Cows are all races and denominations,” says Jesse Gair. A youthful, smiling man with a slender tracery of blonde beard, Gair is the Association’s Youth Manager. “It doesn’t matter who you are, you can join the gang. So if the gangs can do that – take people from all different races and break down racism – then we need to be doing that same thing.”
The Association provides a variety of activities for all age groups, from music and drama to crafts and homework clubs. Its “Building Belonging” program serves young kids by picking them up after school, walking them together to the community centre, doing activities, feeding them and driving them home in the evening in one of the Association’s vans. Teenagers make their own way to the centre and prepare their own suppers. The vans drive them home, too.

“We started sports because we had all these kids coming and none of them had ever played organized sports,” notes Executive Director Jamil Mahmood, a stocky black-bearded man with a quick smile. “We focused on basketball at first and we did two teams, boys and girls, 11 and under, in the Winnipeg Minor Basketball League, which was a fight. The league didn’t want to allow them because we’re not officially a community centre, we’re a rec centre. A community centre in our neighbourhood doesn’t exist.”

In truth, the league was concerned that the Spence teams would enlist kids from all across the inner city and win all the championships. “No,” said Mahmood, “you don’t understand: these kids have never played before. They don’t even have shoes. We just want them to get on a court and play and learn how to do it.” The Association had to find sponsors to provide shoes and jerseys and shorts.

“It was super successful,” Mahmood smiles. “Once our kids knew the rules, they were performing really well, and then they were all prepared to go play on their junior high team when they went to junior high the next year. Six years later, 90% of the kids from those first two teams are still in school. In fact, they’re graduating this year. One of them was actually the number-one ranked player in the province and he’s going to be on the national team next year. He developed his skills here and now his high school coach drives in from the furthest suburb out, and takes him to school so he can play on their high school team.”

Six years later, the Association was running eight teams. In the early years, they won nothing, but now they were winning championships. And they were learning a lot more than dribbling and shooting.

“There’s a lot of community connecting between different races,” says Mahmood. “They don’t really have a choice because they’re on a team together.” He remembers a year when “all the Aboriginal kids would sit at the front of the van and all the newcomer kids at the back, and then an empty seat and they’d be punching each other through the empty seat.” The Association staff and the volunteer coaches worked together with the team, trying to develop mutual respect. In the end, the team won the championship.

“We never focus on winning,” says Mahmood, “but I remember being at that game and seeing the two kids that had been fighting the most run up to each other and give each other
the biggest hug. They lifted each other off the ground. And that’s how simple it is, right?”

One Spence team was funded through a parole program, and included four members of rival gangs, who played together the whole season without incident – although Arguete fielded many phone calls from anxious middle-class parents asking why those four players (and eight, the following year) were wearing electronic ankle monitors.

Competing outside the neighbourhood brought the Spence kids straight up against the traditional sports culture, which assumes that young players will have basic resources, such as transportation, sports gear and money for registration fees. That model, says Mahmood, “doesn’t work in the inner city, especially with Aboriginal people or with newcomers who have never played anything organized. But it works if we provide transportation, food, shoes, clothing, all that stuff. Kids just have to be there and show up.” In meeting after meeting, the Spence staff tell established sports organizations that all they want is a chance for the Spence kids to play. Often it works. Sometimes it doesn’t. Organized soccer, for example, is particularly resistant.

“Our neighbourhood has a lot of newcomers,” notes Arguete, “and soccer is a number one sport for them, so about four years ago we decided to try soccer. In January, we always have this meeting: ‘Can we access your league?’ And it’s always, ‘No.’ ‘Well, why not?’ And they say, ‘Because you never follow the rules.’ And the rules are, like, you have to register at this time, your parent needs to come and sign this document, and you need to bring a picture and a health card to show the address… It’s always a bunch of hoops everybody needs to jump through.

“So, in a community where soccer is the only sport that they know, the system is built in a way that they can’t access. Last year, Manitoba Soccer did a study: 7,000 kids can’t access soccer because of how the system is built – and I can bet that more than 50% of those kids are, like, in this neighbourhood.”

Throwing up their hands, the Spence workers went to the nearby University of Winnipeg men’s soccer team and pointed out that, in five or 10 years, Winnipeg’s soccer stars were going to be immigrant kids from districts such as Spence. Why not form a relationship with them now? The university athletes agreed and Spence formed a “footsol” league – a scaled-down version of soccer, with small nets, a small field and small players. The university athletes became footsol coaches, aided by the university coaches.

“We had 160 kids play in that league this summer,” Arguete smiles, “and they all thought they were in a real soccer league. They got cleats,
they got uniforms and they had the best time of their lives. And now we’re working with Coaching Manitoba, Sport Manitoba, to try to break down all those systemic barriers, like how you coach, the style of facilities, the perception that all inner-city kids are in gangs.”

Coaching inner-city kids, says Arguete, includes teaching the players “how to communicate to the coaches, to the refs and to the fans, and to deal with the pressure of winning. The everyday work that we do includes working with the coaches one on one, saying, ‘You can’t just expect to blow the whistle and everybody gets quiet and lines up and starts doing the drill.’ That has not happened in any of my teams, but that’s the model of coaching that everybody receives.”

The Spence kids also faced some thoroughly nasty reactions from suburban parents. When Spence fielded a team made up largely of African immigrant girls, the parents of the opposing team openly called them “savages.” On another occasion, the suburban parents sat together on one side of the gym, gleefully watched the Spence team being drubbed 50-2 and didn’t even cheer when Spence scored its only basket of the game. And when the Spence teams started winning consistently, they faced a blizzard of complaints from furious middle-class parents. If the inner-city kids were winning, they obviously were cheating.

“I used to think it was a hockey parent thing. We know they’re crazy,” Mahmood smiles, “but all of sudden, I realize it’s any sports parent. There’s a sports parent mentality that they want to win at all costs. And we don’t have that – we just want to give the kids a chance to play.”

In fact, the Spence kids were winning basketball games for a very simple reason: while the suburban kids had many other activities in their lives, the Spence kids had only basketball. It defined who they were – and they played it for hours every day.

When the Association won funding from the True Sport Community Fund – $25,000 a year for three years – the impact was enormous. Recognition by a major national organization hugely enhanced the Association’s credibility, allowing it to lever additional support from local sponsors. The True Sport grant also allowed the Association to create the Sports Coordinator position that Arguete occupied – and with that additional staff position, the sports program exploded. Before the grant, the Association had 40 or 50 kids playing basketball. By the end of the three-year grant, there were 350–400, served by a corps of coaches who volunteered year after year.

“When the kids have that same coach a couple of years in a row, and the coaches actually want to be a role model for those kids, those kids then are almost 99.9% guaranteed to go on to be connected and involved,” says Gair. “But we only have those coaches because True Sport’s funding allowed us to have a Sports Coordinator. Somebody needed to support those coaches; somebody needed to provide transportation for the kids to the game, to provide jerseys and all that kind of stuff. And when there was a problem, the coaches could just call
Chino. The True Sport funding for that one position made us able to support all these other people who were directly supporting these kids.”

The True Sport grant provided up to $18,000 for staff, but only for three years. Replacing that funding was extremely difficult. Most funders, including the city and the province, would far rather spend money on equipment and facilities than on people – which, says Mahmood, is exactly the wrong priority.

“If we can find funding for the people, the programs will happen and the programs will be strong,” he says. But sports organizations are traditionally run by volunteers – and inner-city parents, struggling to get by, simply don’t have the capacity to volunteer. In addition, the administration of a program with 350 participants is really beyond the capacity of volunteers.

“You can get a volunteer to coach, you can get a volunteer to help drive,” Mahmood explains, “but when we’re in peak basketball season, we’re running five 15-passenger vans from 9:00 to 5:00, and we can’t really ask a volunteer to do that. So if you’re going to fund us, don’t give us $5,000 for staffing and $20,000 for equipment. We want $24,500 for staff, and then we’ll take the other $500 and find the equipment ourselves.”

By 2013, the Sports Coordinator position was vacant. Arguete was still heavily involved, but he had moved on to become Recreation and Sport Coordinator at Winnipeg’s Youth Agencies Alliance, a network of 19 agencies under the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. And now, he was moving the revolution forward across the whole city, making contacts and developing policy not only within the Alliance, but also externally. A year into the job, he was helping to create a sports policy body involving the universities, the leagues, the city, the community centres, Sport Manitoba and other organizations. His objective was to change the policies that govern sport in the city and thereby make sports opportunities genuinely accessible to every kid in Winnipeg.

“And if you’re able to do all that, once they’re on the court, it doesn’t matter what happens: they’re there. Whether they win or lose, they’ll have the time of their lives for that one hour.”

“I have always said that once the game starts, that’s the biggest victory already,” Arguete says. “To get to the game, you’ve had to start your day three hours earlier. And if it’s snowing like today, you start four hours earlier, calling all the players and waking them up and reminding them that they need to eat and that they need shoes, and to bring a water bottle. It’s also picking up 15 youth through this neighbourhood and getting them ready once you’re there.

“And if you’re able to do all that, once they’re on the court, it doesn’t matter what happens: they’re there. Whether they win or lose, they’ll have the time of their lives for that one hour.”

And what they learn on the court will endure for the rest of their lives.
FOURTH QUARTER:
THE RIGHTS GAME

The Dawson Community Centre is in the Montreal suburb of Verdun. Thirty or 40 kids are divided in two: half of them on the right-hand side of the gym, half on the left. The ones on the left are Actors; the ones on the right are Runners. The cheerful young counsellor, Cynthia Silvestriadis, calls out, “I have the right to... education!”

The Runners charge across the floor while the Actors drop to one knee. The Runners sit on the other knee, which represents a school bench. The last pair to get into position are eliminated.

Now the Runners and Actors reverse their role, and Silvestriadis calls, “I have the right to... rest!” Nobody is supposed to move – they’re resting, after all – but two pairs do move. Out they go.

“I have the right to... security!” The Runners fly across the room and gather with their backs to the Actors, who encircle them with their arms. And so it goes, until only one Actor and one Runner are standing: the winners. And then the kids all drop to the floor in a circle.

“Did you like that game?” Silvestriadis asks. “What did you like about it?” Everybody liked to run. Everybody liked interacting with others. And what values did they demonstrate? There’s a chorus of responses.

“Friendship! The right to rest! Education! The right to speak, the right to talk! Work in a team!”

“Good!” says Silvestriadis. “Let’s play another game.”

Okay, let’s. We’ll go to the Britannia Community Centre on the east side of Vancouver. Tom Higashio sits in an equipment room off the side of a gym, surrounded by sports equipment and vivid posters made by neighbourhood kids. He’s a big, rangy guy with shaggy black hair and a baseball cap. He describes another game, a cooperative version of musical chairs.

“You play musical chairs the normal way,” he says. “You line everyone up, you play
the music, remove a chair, you stop the music. Everyone sits down and someone gets eliminated. You have them go off to the side. You play three or four rounds of that and, all of the sudden, you have these kids sitting off to the side doing nothing. They’re picking their nose; they’re not even paying attention; they’re not involved in the game anymore.

“And then you have that discussion afterwards, ‘So, when you got eliminated from the game, how did you feel?’ Right? But then, how did you feel when you got invited back in with everyone else? And now you have to strategize. And what are some of the concepts that you had to do in order to get everyone back on these chairs? It’s about teamwork and about communication.”

Now what you do is, you keep the same number of chairs that you’re currently at, but you invite these kids back. And then you start removing chairs, and you say, ‘Now you guys have to figure out how to get everyone on these chairs so that they only have one foot touching the ground’ – or no feet touching the ground, depending on the age and safety of the situation. So how do you figure it out so that you can get less chairs?

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These games – and many others – are in the Play It Fair! Human Rights Education Toolkit for Children, developed by the Equitas International Centre for Human Rights Education in Montreal. Ultimately, these games are rooted in the atrocities of the Second World War, which gave rise to the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The text of that Declaration was drafted by a Canadian diplomat named John Humphreys, the first Director of the UN Division of Human Rights. Humphreys returned to Canada in 1966 to take up a teaching position at McGill University in Montreal and, with a group of like-minded scholars and lawyers, established the Canadian Human Rights Foundation. Forty years later, the Foundation – which later changed its name to Equitas – was running human rights education programs all over the world.

In 2004, Equitas got a call from the City of Montreal, which had a number of partner organizations operating summer day camps. The day camps badly needed a practical tool to address such social issues as bullying, racism, exclusion and discrimination. The city wondered whether Equitas could develop something suitable. After an extensive needs assessment, Equitas created what became the Play It Fair! program, aimed at children from 6 to 12 years of age, which made
its debut in Montreal that same year. In 2006, it was piloted for day camps and after-school programs in five cities across the country.

At the core of the program is the Play It Fair! Toolkit, which is always used in combination with trained child-care workers. The Toolkit provides an array of games that give participants an actual experience of human rights issues and lead naturally into a debriefing and discussion session. In those discussions, children can discuss issues in their lives and work together to promote inclusion, respect, fairness, acceptance and cooperation. The Toolkit’s great strength is that it presents these issues not as frightening problems, but as fun.

Amy Cooper, an Equitas education specialist, notes that many organizations have explicit policy statements promoting and supporting children’s rights and other positive values, but “they don’t actually have tools or strategies to do that intentionally or explicitly.” Play It Fair! provides those instruments.

“When we first learned about the Toolkit, we were a little sceptical,” says Higashio, who took part in the 2006 pilot program. “How are you going to get the 6- to 12-year-old kids to have a discussion? “But as you practise it, and as you try it and as you use it, you realize that it’s about just getting these kids to talk – and kids want to talk and they want to contribute. They’re frighteningly honest, which is fantastic! They don’t have what a lot of teens and adults have in terms of being restricted by peer pressures or what’s socially acceptable.
“We use the Toolkit on a regular basis. In our day camp programs, we use it three to 10 times a week. We use it as well to help children understand an issue that may come up. We also make sure that our staff are practising it at staff meetings. We even use it in our hiring process.

Equitas later developed a sister program for teenagers called Speaking Rights. As the two programs gained momentum, Equitas evolved into a training and support organization, overseeing the spread of the programs into additional communities and organizations.

By 2013, Play It Fair! and Speaking Rights had reached 20 communities and 450 organizations in cities such as Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Fredericton and Moncton. New partnerships were developing in Victoria, Halifax and Charlottetown, and the program was also reaching First Nations communities in Manitoba, Nova Scotia and British Columbia. Equitas had trained about 7,000 day camp, recreation and after-school workers, and had reached a total of 300,000 children in Canada, and the program was spreading to other countries as well. Its approach and its materials had been adopted by organizations such as the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and the cities of Vancouver, Winnipeg and Toronto. Equitas had begun working with the Montreal Alouettes football team, who sometimes do school visits. Play It Fair! had also generated some interest from the Montreal Impact soccer team and even from the legendary Montreal Canadiens.

Sport for development? Perhaps not exactly; Play It Fair! is more like play with a purpose. But the purpose is the same: building respect, building tolerance and fairness, building community. If you learn to play it fair in your childhood, you won’t be a thug later on.

“And we’ve seen some phenomenal results from it. We see change in the attitudes and aptitudes of the participants involved and also of our volunteers and our staff. It’s funny how we play a couple of the conflict games and then, later on in the summer, you see kids internalizing – not even internalizing, but going ‘Okay, calm down, calm down, calm down, calm down…’ And then they go through the steps of what we’re teaching them in the game.

“A bunch of our volunteers have gone on to become teachers, and they bring the concepts and values of the Toolkit into the classroom. Some of our volunteers have become journalists for human rights advocacy. The values that they learned within our program – while they were educating other young people about it – became super important to them.”
Brown is the Coordinator of the Ray-Cam Co-operative Community Centre in the heart of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. V6A is the most impoverished postal code in Canada, the street address of misery and despair, a place of homelessness, addiction, prostitution and robbery – a neighbourhood where the police make the national news by hauling in 30 binge-drinking Aboriginal kids who have formed a suicide pact. A scary, hopeless place.

That’s the story as told on TV and in the headlines. And the statistics support it.

But there’s another story: a story about disadvantaged citizens struggling against daunting obstacles, patronized and manipulated by authorities and organizations, but striving to control their own lives and provide opportunities for their children. The Ray-Cam Centre itself – which is attached to what was once known as the Raymur Social Housing Project – grew out of just such a struggle.

Built in 1970, Raymur was Canada’s largest social-housing complex, and it fell within the Seymour School catchment area. But the major rail line serving the Port of Vancouver severed the housing complex from the school, so the children had to dodge boxcars en route to class. The parents objected, but nobody cared – not the railway, not the school board, not the governments. Then, one of the kids was hit by a train and the outraged mothers camped in tents on the tracks, which shut down the port. Some mothers were jailed.

Suddenly everyone cared. Money bubbled up. A pedestrian overpass sprang into being.

Flushed with success, the community pressed for a community centre – and got that, too. The Ray-Cam Centre was jointly funded by the province (which provided the building), the federal government (which contributed maintenance costs) and the city (which helped with adminis-
trative costs). Community residents comprised 80% of the centre’s board members. Today, the governments contribute a little under $1 million annually, and the volunteer board raises another $2 million through its own efforts.

Ray-Cam’s trailblazing sports program – ultimately known as MoreSports – evolved in an oddly parallel way. One spring day in 1998, some kids were kicking a soccer ball around a local park, accompanied by one of the kids’ fathers. A man approached them and told them to leave; the park was reserved for soccer clubs with permits. The father, whose name was Chuck Tait, asked how the local kids could join such a club – and was told it would cost $125 per child, and each family would also have to help out with equipment, coaching and transportation. As the kids watched, a stream of cars arrived, and two teams from the affluent West Side piled out, pulled on their uniforms and cleats, and literally took the field.

Tait was on the Ray-Cam board, and he was furious. Although 75% of Vancouver’s kids lived in the Eastside, the city’s sports programs mainly served the West Side kids. Didn’t poor kids have a right to play too?

The board agreed, but the problem wasn’t just money. An inner-city sports program would also need coaches, equipment and places to train and play. It would have to overcome ethnic and cultural issues, language barriers and much more. In fact, it would require that the community itself develop new skills and strengths, and build new partnerships.

So, the original group of parents partnered with the elementary schools to run their soccer program not in the parks on the weekends, but in the schoolyards, in the after-school period when many kids are at loose ends. They applied successfully to Human Resources Development Canada for a project grant and found the coaches they needed by training local people – which proved to be an incredibly creative strategy. For the youngest kids, they enlisted single mothers, sometimes grandmothers.

Single mothers “are not comfortable coaching an older group of boys because that would embarrass their sons,” says Brown. “But they’re really comfortable with younger kids. So we started there.” One grandmother eventually developed enough confidence to coach pre-teens, even though she had never played a sport in her life.
could afford, hidden within a sealed envelope that was sometimes empty. And the Ray-Cam community had learned a lot.

“I come from a sports background,” says Dick Woldring, the coordinator of MoreSports and YELL, the programs that grew out of those early experiments. “In the traditional sports model, coaches are highly technically skilled people in their sport who know nothing about how to work with children. In our model, parents are not highly technically skilled and many of them have never played, but they know how to relate to children. And simple technical stuff is easy to get. You don’t need to be a wizard to teach a kindergarten kid how to play soccer.”

Four years later, MoreSports had 3,800 kids in sports programs. It was spreading throughout the inner city – and it desperately needed leaders. Although it had little access to parent volunteers, it had plenty of access to disengaged teenagers. So it created a program called Youth Engage Learn Lead (YELL) to recruit and train local youth.

YELL was a brilliant solution that not only created coaches and leaders, but also built community capacity. YELL participants obtain recognized coaching and leadership credentials at no cost, and all their diplomas, hours and activities are tracked and recorded. By January 2011, nearly 3,500 youth had taken leadership training and were able to serve as volunteers, which hugely magnified the capabilities of the MoreSports program.
The organized sports system, Woldring says, “gets to about 25% of the kids in Canada, which is pretty good. But that means that 75% of the kids are doing nothing. The target audience that we’re after is the 75%.” So the program just kept expanding.

Early in the process, Brown went to other community centres and described a way to serve huge numbers of kids by using trained volunteers. “I’d say, ‘You just hired an instructor. You have a four-hour minimum under the labour code for that person. He’s running a floor hockey program with 20 kids, the same 20 kids for four hours, and he gets another 20 kids in the next four hours. What if you took that same person and made him a coach coordinator or a leader coordinator? He could have 10 or 12 young people who are trained, working under him. You could have a whole field of games.’”

Instead of 40 kids, such a program could serve hundreds, at no extra cost – as Spence Neighbourhood Association had also discovered. In fact, says Woldring, Ray-Cam’s biggest program serves as many as 700 kids in a day, and “there’s one paid person on the field over a seven-hour period. There are 80 or 90 volunteer coaches and 700 kids. And that paid staff person’s job is to make sure the coaches and the mentors are behaving inside the values set. That’s using your money effectively. It works phenomenally well.”

Supported through McConnell Foundation funding, MoreSports and YELL soon spread to other Eastside neighbourhoods. They developed a “networked Hub” model that involved partnerships not only with the Vancouver School Board and the Vancouver Parks Board, but also with community centres, neighbourhood associations, social service providers and others. MoreSports currently boasts seven Hubs, each serving a population of 20,000–25,000 people and encompassing a total of 17 Vancouver neighbourhoods. The Hubs allow MoreSports and YELL activities to be locally driven and to reflect their own community priorities while also being supported by the MoreSports/YELL central team.

“Usually, the bigger schools are where the Hub goes,” Brown explains. “Then you bring in the community centres, which allows the activities to happen both at the school and on the Parks sites, under the supervision of both the Parks staff and the school staff – which means all the insurance and this management stuff is taken care of.” By 2010, there were 8,700 kids playing 24 sports at 33 sites, guided by 1,332 mainly volunteer coaches.

A further refinement of YELL trains older students to serve as mentors to younger students. In many schools, primary and intermediate children are separated to prevent the older
kids from bullying the younger ones. But a new program called Y2 provides leadership skills to kids in grades 5–7, using them as mentors to the K–4s, which instantly shrinks the bullying. Among the resources used by the grades 5–7 is the Play It Fair! Toolkit from Equitas. Meanwhile, the grades 5–7 mentors are themselves being mentored by high school YELL leaders.

“The anti-bullying message is built into what they do,” says Woldring. “The anti-racism message, it’s not separate; it’s built into what you do. And those guys eventually grow into being the YELL leaders. By the time they come out of Grade 12, they got 12 years of being used to being physically active.”

And, one might add, 12 years of guidance and attention, of being connected with caring adults, of mentoring and being mentored – 12 years, in fact, of being truly functional members of a genuine community.

“One of the spinoffs,” says Woldring, “is that a lot of kids doing the YELL program didn’t want to actually play sports. So we ended up doing the Homework Club, the Chess Club, the Cooking Club. It wasn’t sport – but leadership is leadership. And that’s why YELL actually grew so fast, because some schools figured out they had this massive resource called teenagers who are quite prepared and want to lead.”

Trained leadership, it turns out, has many applications. When local Aboriginal organizations wanted to increase native participation in local community centres, they sought to embed an Aboriginal presence in the centres. The solution turned out to be Motivate Canada’s GEN7 Messenger program.

“We went to the Parks Board and the community centres and we said, ‘We’d like you to sponsor a GEN7 Messenger in each of the centres,’” Brown recalls. Each centre would provide $5,000, which would employ a GEN7 Messenger as an auxiliary worker in an actual staff position. The youth would serve both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. If the arrangement worked well, Parks would continue the Messengers as regular employees, which would give them a toehold in the unionized municipal employment system.

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Four centres agreed – and when they went recruiting, almost all the Messenger applicants emerged from YELL. Motivate Canada was “amazed,” says Brown, “because they never received that many applications in all the sites they’d been to.”

YELL has even become an instrument that the young leaders use spontaneously among themselves.

“Last summer, some of our YELL leaders were running a sports program out in the back of the housing project,” says Brown. “We had kids
running around all hours of the night, without their parents supervising. It’s really dangerous in this community. So, without our involvement, the YELL kids, who also live in the project, decided that kids shouldn’t be out past nine o’clock at night. They went to all the homes and they said, ‘Your kid can only be in this program if you bring them in by nine o’clock.’ And then they told the kids, ‘You’re only in our program if you’re home at nine o’clock. If we hear you’re out running around, you’re not in our program.’”

Woldring was “stunned. I said ‘You did what?’ But it worked.”

MoreSports and YELL had really become a brand, says Brown, “a brand for a set of values and a set of principles and a way of working that is based on place. It’s based on allowing diversity to be part of that system. And it’s using existing resources more effectively.

With the city-wide extension of the programs, says Woldring, “You can be a kid from anywhere in the city and take a YELL leadership program anywhere you want. You get a passport with your name on it. It lists all the training that you’ve taken and the certification. Your hours are logged in for you by the sites where you do your practicum work or your volunteer work. You can use that passport for resumés. You can use it to get into university. You can use it for all sorts of things. You can also go on the website – there’s a special login for all the YELL leaders – and you can see the volunteer opportunities anywhere in the city that are sanctioned by MoreSports.”

And now, says Brown, “You’re connected. You can stay connected into university if you want. If your family moves to another neighbourhood, you can still stay connected through that system.

“Now you’re a citizen of Vancouver.”
Sixth Lap: Values Gone Viral

Ray-Cam has been brilliantly successful in embedding MoreSports and YELL — along with some of its sister programs and their shared values — into the infrastructure of recreation in Vancouver. Can that be done for the country as a whole?

“The broad culture has been ready for this for a long time,” says Doug Gore, program manager for sport and recreation at Ontario’s Trillium Foundation. “But organized sport is such a massive industry, with millions of people who are signed up in formalized programs, that it’s like the federal government. How do you change it? We all know it’s broken, but what do you do with it?” People within the sports system, he says, just think “It’s a change to the system, but it’s not. This is social and behavioural change. It’s a change to society.”

It is, and it faces some surprising obstacles — in the area of financing, for instance. Because Canadian law regards sport and recreation as primarily for the benefit of the individual participants rather than for the benefit of society at large, sports organizations cannot register as charities and cannot give tax-deductible receipts for financial contributions. That’s why companies donate to cultural, health and educational organizations, but sponsor teams and athletes.

That’s also the reason wealthy individuals rarely make contributions or bequests to sports organizations — and foundations never do. Yet many potential donors would like to support sport. Indeed, sport is the starting point for about 65% of Canada’s lifelong volunteers, who got their first volunteer experiences through sport and recreation.

The only way that a donor can make a tax-deductible contribution to a non-charitable organization — such as a sports organization — is to funnel the money through a registered charity, which then can contract with the target organization to take actions that support the charity’s objectives. For example, if you bought billboard advertising urging men to have prostate examinations, the advertising agency couldn’t give you a tax receipt. But...
if you gave the money to a medical charity or a foundation which in turn contracted with an ad agency to buy the billboard advertising, your gift to the charity or foundation – the “fiduciary” organization in this scenario – would indeed be deductible.

The starting point for community development, in McKnight’s view, is an evaluation not of what the community lacks, but of the assets it already has, and the way they might most effectively be deployed.

So, community sport needs new allies – and is finding them. Canada is blessed with nearly 190 community foundations, spread from coast to coast, which together distribute more than $154 million annually, and are finding ever more creative ways to serve their communities. Until 2004, for instance, few community foundations had done much environmental grant-making. That year, the McConnell Foundation joined with the Community Foundations of Canada, the national network, to help local foundations move more resources into this area. McConnell provided seed money and training. Over a period of five years, their $3 million in matching funds stimulated community foundations to intensify their efforts in the area. The local foundations eventually went on to award $17 million in environmental grants.

If that kind of leadership could bolster environmental grant-making, might something similar help with the tax problems faced by sport?

Some leaders of the sport-for-development movement – notably Paul Melia of the CCES, Ian Bird, formerly of the Sport Matters Group and now Executive Director of the Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), and Trillium’s Doug Gore – began exploring the idea with the McConnell Foundation, which had already been deeply involved with the True Sport movement. Since the True Sport Foundation is a legitimate charity, it could presumably act as the fiduciary for sport organizations, turning contributions given to local community foundations into contracts and grants to local, non-charitable sports organizations. So if John and Jennie Sawchuk in Winnipeg wanted to contribute $5,000 to the Spence Neighbourhood Association, could they get a tax receipt by giving the funds to the Winnipeg Community Foundation – Canada’s oldest, founded in 1921 – and having the funds advanced to Spence by means of a contract with the True Sport Foundation? Why not?

And why couldn’t that work for every community foundation in Canada? The donors would get their receipt, the sports group would get its money and True Sport would take a small administration fee that would allow it to build up a fund to support new community sport initiatives. Furthermore, the community foundation could mobilize matching funds from other sources; True Sport itself has a program that matches community donations for quality sport activities. And, most important of all, True Sport’s involvement with community foundations creates opportunities to provide a wide range of sports groups and related organiza-
tions with the whole suite of True Sport values and training.

In another development, Gore had observed that many shoestring sports organizations actually have significant reserve funds that can’t be used for routine operations – legacies, leftover funds from capital fundraising or Canada Games operations and the like. Could these pools of sterile cash be donated to local community foundations, which could then create dedicated sport and recreation endowments? Could the foundations also double those endowments by finding matching funds? If so, the sports organizations would have a local fund to tap and the grants could be channelled through True Sport.

In the midst of all this rethinking, Melia had been inspired by a workshop at St. Francis Xavier University with social philosopher John McKnight, and had sponsored an Ottawa workshop for sports groups based on McKnight’s concept of Asset-Based Community Development. The starting point for community development, in McKnight’s view, is an evaluation not of what the community lacks, but of the assets it already has, and the way they might most effectively be deployed. And the assets aren’t always obvious. It took a special acuteness at Ray-Cam to see the idle teenagers and single mothers in the Downtown Eastside as assets in creating MoreSports and YELL. It took a clear, calm vision for the people at Spence to see community-building potential in Winnipeg’s young offenders.
So, could the community foundations take the lead in bringing local sport organizations together with churches, libraries, schools and social services to explore the possibilities of using sport and recreation for community development? Could these organizations jointly map the community’s overall recreational assets and ambitions? Could the foundations then use grants very strategically to supply any missing assets? That would transform grant-making in community foundations into a collaborative process of community self-evaluation and planning – and not necessarily only in sport and recreation. All of which beautifully illustrates the powerful impact of organized sport as a tool to shape and develop communities.

What we see today, says the CFC’s Bird, is “a continuum of new developments based on a relatively new idea coming into a more mainstream place in society, and amongst institutions.” Eventually, he thinks, the use of sport as a development tool will become routine; people will “come to expect it to be going on in their community, like people would expect other things to be happening.”

In fact, that transition is already taking place. Canada’s RENEWED Sport Policy, adopted in 2012 by Canadian governments at all levels, calls for a sports culture that is values-based, inclusive, collaborative, sustainable and rooted in empirical research. It specifically recognizes “sport for development” as one of its policy goals, and encourages the use of sport “as a tool for social and economic development, and the promotion of positive values at home and abroad.”

The new policy represents a logical progression from the London Declaration of 2001. It was heavily influenced by the Sport Matters Group, a voluntary group of leaders from more than 60 sports organizations who seek to advance sport and public policy, and to develop innovative approaches to both fields. Sport Matters also organized the Working Together Initiative, which brought together individuals, community organizations and federal and provincial departments to find ways of using sports and physical activity to achieve a whole range of social objectives. The Initiative’s broader goal is to demonstrate ways that very different organizations pursuing the same objectives can work collaboratively and synergistically, rather than remaining isolated from one another and ignorant of one another’s work.

Back in 1989, the Dubin Inquiry report implicitly asked a question: Can sport in Canada be
transformed so that its social and moral impact actually accords with its promise? The answer seems to be that – given a focused national campaign, some judiciously targeted funding and a passionate effort from many individuals and organizations – sport can indeed be reinvented and reoriented. Even more exciting, sport in the future can become a profound and powerful instrument to enrich the lives of communities – and to light up the lives of individual Canadians, young and old alike.
Sackaney laughs when he tells this story. He is 31, a guidance counsellor at the school in the Peetabeck First Nation in Fort Albany, Ontario, a fly-in community on the western shore of James Bay. Peetabeck is home to 800 souls, almost all of them Mushkego Cree. Naturally, the constable expects to know them all. Although Justin is a member of the band, he didn’t grow up here. He grew up in Timmins, 490 kilometres and a $1,000 airfare away.

Timmins High and Vocational School had a powerhouse basketball team, shaped by a legendary coach named Hugh Meyer. After a successful high school career, Sackaney enrolled at the University of New Brunswick, expecting to play there. But UNB had just recruited an elite group of players and Sackaney didn’t make the cut. That stung. When he received his psychology degree, he couldn’t find a job in New Brunswick either. That stung, too. But there was a counselling job at Peetabeck Academy and so, in 2006, Sackaney moved “home” to the ancestral reserve that he’d only ever visited.

“There was not much going on for the youth,” he recalls, so he started “fooling around” with basketball after school. The kids were sloppy and unmotivated, so he and another teacher hit on the idea of asking them if they’d like to form a team and compete in the annual Creehoops tournament held in Moose Factory, 150 kilometres away down the winter ice road. Sure, said the kids. They formed a boys’ team and a girls’ team. Now, said Sackaney, you’ll have to work hard and practise.

Sackaney laughs when he tells this story. The constable was scowling as he approached the pickup. “Who are you?” he demanded. “Justin,” said the driver. “Justin who?” “Justin Sackaney.” “Oh!” said the constable, brightening into a smile. “Oh, the basketball guy! Fine, you’re good to go.”
They didn’t. When they went to Creehoops, they “got slaughtered.” The girls lost by more than 100 points.

But the kids had loved it – going to another town, playing games, staying in a hotel. Sackaney, meanwhile, thought that younger children might be easier to train, so he started a girls’ junior high team. One of the players was his cousin Roseanne Knapaysweet. Then the junior high boys demanded a team. So Peetabeck Academy went to the next Creehoops with four teams, made up of kids who took the enterprise a lot more seriously than the previous year.

The whole building is a sculpture rooted in the traditional Mushkego vision of the world. It is by far the most gracious and welcoming school I have ever seen.

Edmund Metatawabin is an author, businessman and organizer who was chief of the Peetabeck band for eight years. He says he is not an elder; an elder has to have seen five generations, and he’s only seen four. But he’s certainly a leader. He is fiercely proud of Peetabeck Academy, and with his wife, Joan, he is happy to show it off.

The school, he explains, is shaped like a crescent moon or a pair of embracing arms. All the rooms open off the same long, curving corridor. The roof over the main entrance looks like the head of a goose – a bird of sustenance for the Mushkego people – and the adjoining roofs are canted forward in imitation of the tilted wings of the goose as it brakes in the air to land. The steel posts in front of the school evoke the shape of a tipi or a dream catcher or the goose-hunter’s blind.

At the heart of the school is the spacious gym, a bright library and a kitchen where twice-daily snacks are prepared for every child, under Joan’s guidance. In the main hallway is a semi-circular discussion pit decorated with imagery of eagles, geese, moose, canoes, tipis and moons.

“The school is shaped like a ceremony,” Edmund explains. Like two ceremonies, in fact. One is the Shaputuan ceremony, which honours the journey of learning that is a human life. We all come from the womb of our Mother, the Earth, and travel down a corridor, learning “to use a good heart and be kind and helpful to everyone.” Later, we pass on what we have learned. Eventually, we graduate.

In Mushkego settlements, the central tipi, the most important building, always faces east to honour the beginning of day. The water drum ceremony acknowledges the primacy of the east-facing front door and the importance of beginnings. In front of the door, the dream catcher prevents “inappropriate information” from reaching the minds of the young people. And under the dream catcher is a firepit, the symbol of love being fire.

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traditional Mushkego vision of the world. It is by far the most gracious and welcoming school I have ever seen.

Of Peetabeck Academy’s 200 students, only 50 are in junior and senior high. Since each basketball team has 10 members, 80% of the high school students are engaged – so the impact of the basketball program was profound. As teams began travelling to Timmins, New Liskeard, Kapuskasing and Sudbury, the players stopped smoking and drinking and began taking care of their bodies. They developed self-confidence, became more focused, got into much less trouble.

But travelling from Peetabeck is expensive. A season’s travel budget can reach $40,000; Creehoops alone costs about $10,000. So Sackaney, the parents and community groups organized bingos, bake sales, hockey pools and poker rallies.

And the students responded. Every year, the teams grew stronger, and so did the players and the bonds within the community. The town has no hockey arena, Knapaysweet notes, so she and her friends play basketball every day. When she’s asked to “draw a map of your life,” she writes a little instant memoir about her long relationship with basketball.

By 2010, Peetabeck teams were winning at Creehoops and other tournaments, sometimes beating schools nearly 10 times their size. That year, the high school boys won their division at Creehoops. Two years later, a graduating student went off to college in southern Ontario, won a place on the basketball team – and laid a ghost to rest for Sackaney.

“I was so happy!” Sackaney recalls. “Up to that point, I was still bothered by being cut at UNB and I was worried that she was going to relive my experience. When she made it, I was so pleased – and I was able to let my own experience go.”

Every year, the teams grew stronger, and so did the players and the bonds within the community. The town has no hockey arena, Knapaysweet notes, so she and her friends play basketball every day. When she’s asked to “draw a map of your life,” she writes a little instant memoir about her long relationship with basketball.

By now, Sackaney was “the basketball guy,” a coach and counsellor who knew how to develop a transformative basketball program. He was appointed a GEN7 Messenger, charged with spreading basketball fever to Blind River, 750 kilometres away. But first he was assigned to reflect on the program he had developed in Peetabeck – which was still growing and strengthening.

In 2012, the senior high girls won the title at Creehoops. Knapaysweet was on that team and, by now, she was setting her sights on college basketball herself. In that very same week, the Tragically Hip came to Peetabeck as part
of The Great Moon Gathering, a regional educational conference designed to help integrate traditional Cree learning with formal education. Edmund Metatawabin had invited the Aboriginal novelist Joseph Boyden to deliver the keynote address; when Boyden accepted, Metatawabin slyly suggested that he, in turn, invite Gord Downie, lead singer of The Tragically Hip, whom Boyden knew. Improbably enough, Downie also agreed – and brought the entire band and a small film crew along with him.

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So now, more than half the population of Pee-tabeck has crowded into the school gymnasium for the Tragically Hip concert, emceed by the CBC’s legendary Shelagh Rogers, who has flown in from the West Coast at her own expense to participate. The band that will open for The Tragically Hip is a local group called Northern Revolution – and the band’s lead singer is Knapaysweet, fresh from the big win at Creehoops in Moose Factory. She has a crowd of 450 in front of her and a legendary rock band behind her. She’s been scared plenty of times before, but this, she says later, is “the scariest moment of my life.” She has to sing. She has to be good. But…

Can she do it? Can she?

She takes a deep breath, inhaling strength, and then she opens her mouth and exhales music. The music flows out into the ears and the spirits of the people who formed her, out into the air where the children shout and the basketballs fly. The music of her voice fills the night in the beautiful school, the school that is shaped like a ceremony.

She can. She can. She can.
Silver Donald Cameron is currently the executive producer and host of the innovative and ambitious video web-site, www.TheGreenInterview.com. He is also an extremely popular public speaker.

In a diverse career, Dr. Cameron has written plays, films, radio and TV, an extensive body of corporate and governmental writing, hundreds of magazine articles and newspaper columns, and seventeen books, including two novels. His most recent books are Sailing Away from Winter (2007), story of a cruise with his wife and dog from Nova Scotia to the Bahamas on a 31-foot sailboat, and A Million Futures: The Remarkable Legacy of the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (2010). A wide variety of his writing is accessible on his web-site, www.silverdonaldcameron.ca.

Dr. Cameron is also a distinguished educator who holds degrees from the University of British Columbia, the University of California, and the University of London, England, in addition to two honorary doctorates. He has been a high-school teacher and principal, and has served either as a professor, dean or writer-in-residence at six Canadian universities. In 2012 he was awarded both the Order of Canada and the Order of Nova Scotia. He lives in Halifax with his wife, Marjorie Simmins, also an award-winning writer.

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I want equally to thank all the people involved with sport for development that I interviewed from coast to coast to coast. Many of them are quoted or named in the text, but not all of them – and without exception they were gracious and generous with their time, and perceptive in their comments. This is a field in which understanding is constantly growing out of practice, as imaginative people figure out new ways to solve unique problems. There is no way to grasp sport for development except to go out and meet the people who are creating that understanding in their daily work, and I am deeply indebted to each of them.