

A sporting chance

Competitive sports promote healthy living among Canada's most vulnerable youth

by Peigi McGillivray

When Dr. Jeff Reading at the University of Victoria's Centre for Aboriginal Health Research watched the North American Indigenous Games in Cowichan last year, he saw much more than the thrill of competition.

He saw possibilities for better health and increased resiliency in Aboriginal communities across the province.

"The news about the health of Aboriginal young people is usually bad," says Reading. "We hear about suicide, smoking, drug and alcohol use, and all kinds of other risky behaviours. But at the Games, more than 6,000 Aboriginal athletes presented another picture entirely—of healthy, strong and determined young people. I wondered if we could learn lessons from them that would help others."

Reading and team members Rachel Link and Miranda Kelly—both recent UVic graduates—built on a survey about Aboriginal health that was developed for use at the 2002 Indigenous Games in Winnipeg.

"The Aboriginal Youth Lifestyle Survey was designed to look at tobacco use and other health factors," says Kelly. "We were curious whether mentorship might also play a positive role in young athletes' lives."

The team surveyed 325 Indigenous Games participants, unearthing some fascinating statistics.

"We found that almost 95 per cent of those we interviewed were currently not smoking, that more than half exercised four or more

times a week, and that nearly three-quarters felt they were in very good or excellent health," says Link. "This suggests that participation in sport may well act as a protective health factor for Aboriginal youth."

When talking to young Aboriginal athletes about mentorship, the team used questions that were relevant to their lives and broader than the limited Western definition of mentorship.

"Three-quarters of those we talked to reported having more than one mentor—and almost a third had five or more, including family members, elders and friends, as well as formal, non-family mentors," says Kelly. "What's more, almost 80 per cent reported that they, in turn, are mentors to others in their communities."

Reading believes that the team's findings will open new avenues for research, and offer new hope for educators, policy-makers, Aboriginal community leaders and others seeking to close the gap in health status between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

"The example these athletes set is inspirational. We need to find out how best to translate it into policies and practices that can improve the health of vulnerable young people."

Reading adds that the study will be incorporated into UVic courses in Aboriginal public and population health. "Too often, media reports leave the impression that all Aboriginal people are unhealthy," he says. "This study helps counteract that negative stereotyping by focusing on the positive influences of physical activity, role models and peers."

Reading and psychologist Dr. Chris Lalonde are co-directors of the Centre for Aboriginal Health Research. It's part of a network of nine centres across Canada funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, each with a regional focus.

In BC and the Arctic, research priorities include chronic disease and mental health, traditional medicine, nutrition and research ethics.

“Translating knowledge into concrete, positive action is a top priority,” says Reading. “Our job is to bring Aboriginal communities and researchers closer together to find strategies that improve health.”