

# Ethnohistory Field School Report 2015

## **Of Salish Sluggers and Totem Tigers: A History of Boxing in Stó:lō Territory, 1912-1985**

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The Ethnohistory Field School is a collaboration of the  
Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, Stó:lō Nation & Stó:lō Tribal Council, and the  
History Departments of the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan.





BUCKSKIN CONTENDERS — Reg Thompson, Edward Williams, Clarence Ned and Carmen Prest.

### **Introduction: Research Questions, Historiography Theoretical Considerations, Methodology**

Lakota scholar Philip Deloria concluded his 2004 historical monograph that Americans (and by extension Canadians) of European ancestry often astounded when they encounter “Indians” in places where they least expect to find them.<sup>1</sup> Earlier this year, I experienced such a phenomenon. Every two years, the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Victoria collaborate with the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre to organize an Ethnohistory Field School. For a month undergraduate and graduate students reside alongside the Stó:lō people in the Fraser Valley to learn about the theory and method of ethnohistory, experience a different culture, and research and report on historical topics that are of interest to the community. In April, students of the 2015 cohort were asked to select the topics that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a phenomena that was been identified by Deloria to describe how mainstream American society often has expectations of indigenous North American peoples, which contributes to imagining them in stereotypical ways. One of these ways is that Native Americans are primitives that live outside modern culture and technology. When Native Americans behave in unexpected ways – by dressing in suits, getting manicures, or using computers – they are considered anomalies. See Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 4-10, 230-232.

they wished to work on. The list included subjects related to hunting and fishing, as well as old village sites, which have obvious value in land claims disputes and the treaty making process that is ongoing in B.C. In these negotiations, First Nation communities are expected to demonstrate to the federal and B.C. provincial government previous occupation and use in order to have their claims to land and resources considered legitimate.<sup>2</sup> Other topics sought to preserve knowledge of traditional cultural practices (such as canoe racing, birthing practices, and Salish weaving) while some considered the impact of colonialism on the health of indigenous people and past economies. As a PhD student who had recently completed a comprehensive major field in comparative aboriginal history, I was expecting topics on hunting, fishing, logging, canoe racing, crafts, and tuberculosis hospitals. What I was not expecting was “The History of Boxing in Stó:lō Territory.” I remember doing a double take when I first noticed it; I was momentarily startled by its appearance. Never had I considered that the Stó:lō might have been remotely interested in “the manly art of self-defence.” I should have known better. One of my favorite books among the two hundred I read for my comprehensive exams was Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places*. In it, he unearthed “hidden histories” of early-twentieth century American Indians as they engaged with modern American culture and technology. Participation in recreational, amateur, and professional athletics was one of them, so I should have been prepared to see something similar in the Fraser Valley. Laughing off my momentary disbelief, having a deep-seated interest in boxing (having participated in it as a youth) I decided then and there that I wanted to work on that project.

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<sup>2</sup> For an illustration of the challenges of the contemporary land claims process and assertion of treaty rights, which are often adjudicated by the courts, see *Arthur Ray, Telling it to the Judge: Taking Native History to Court* (Montreal & Toronto: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012).

The history of boxing in Stó:lō territory is, to me, one of Deloria's purported "hidden histories." However, for the Stó:lō and other Fraser Valley indigenous peoples, boxing lives brightly in the collective memory of individuals and communities. On occasions where I spoke to First Nations individuals and explained my research topic, invariably they would tell me that they knew lots of boxers and commenced listing off people I should talk to. In 2013, Darwin Douglas – community leader, MMA fighter and proprietor of the Four Directions Martial Arts Academy on the grounds of the Coqualeetza reserve in Chilliwack, B.C. – inquired to Ethnohistory Field School leadership as to why none of the students had never looked into the history of Stó:lō boxing. Deeply concerned with the problems faced by Stó:lō youth – alcohol and drug abuse, school drop-out rates, violence among young people, delinquency, elevated suicide rates, and a perceived lack of motivation to achieve – at our first meeting to discuss the project, Darwin expressed the hope that a book could eventually be the end result. It was intended to be something to inspire pride in the Stó:lō past, to offer motivation to the youth to strive and succeed. To provide a foundation for this broader project, Darwin expressed a desire to identify as many Stó:lō and other First Nations boxers as possible – and to establish a set of standard questions for subsequent interviews. Having heard stories of boxing in the hop yards and at residential schools, Darwin wanted to learn about the various contexts that it had historically occurred and how it had been organized and conducted. He wanted to know how individuals got into the sport and why they continued to participate. Seeing the value of sport in developing healthy bodies, fostering self-confidence, and instilling the values of discipline and sacrifice, Darwin wanted to explore the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of

participation in boxing and whether past Stó:lō boxers perceived it as a positive influence on their lives.

These are all important questions to the Stó:lō but the study of boxing, as a sport, also has the potential to illuminate broad historical questions, including the strategy and execution of Canada's past colonial assimilation policy. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Canada took more of an interest in remaking First Nations peoples in the image of the European as a way to gain control of North American land and resources, as well as to facilitate the formation of a homogenous citizenry based on individualist, capitalist, and liberal ethos.<sup>3</sup> The recent TRC executive summary has stated that the Canadian state embarked on a program of cultural genocide meant to completely eradicate native cultures and economies. Researching and disseminating information to the Canadian public concerning these historical colonial relationships is of vital importance to the TCR in the process of reconciliation. They believe that a lack of understanding in these matters maintains negative stereotypes (such as the "Lazy Indian" who refuses to work, content to just sit around the reserve collecting welfare and other social programs benefits) and creates distrust between Euro-Canadians and First Nations people.<sup>4</sup> The history of sport, including boxing, contributes to the project of generating new knowledge about these historical relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott describes the government process of transforming a mish-mash of local, indirectly-administered economies and polities – often based on communal models – into a homogenous, national system based on the individual in regards to taxation, land ownership, and labour as imposing "legibility," which occurred in Europe from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century; see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). To see this colonial transformation in the context of the B.C. interior see Keith D. Smith, *Liberalism, Surveillance, and Resistance: Indigenous Communities in Western Canada, 1877-1927* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada" (2015), 114-115, 8-9. The report can be accessed at [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Exec\\_Summary\\_2015\\_06\\_25\\_web\\_o.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Exec_Summary_2015_06_25_web_o.pdf). For an

Aboriginal involvement in sport and its connection to the colonial enterprise is an emerging topic of interest among North American scholars. In the United States, Philip Deloria has recognized the importance of athletics and athletic competition as a potential vehicle for encouraging American Indian assimilation and integration. European missionaries of late-nineteenth century believed in the “civilizing possibilities of structured games” based on the belief in “Muscular Christianity,” which linked piety with physical health.<sup>5</sup> Americans believed that indigenous men were naturally untrustworthy, irresponsible, lazy, and sexually promiscuous, which made them unmanly by Euro-American middle-class standards. Sports encouraged assimilation under the guidance of white men, who inculcated proper expressions of masculinity, thus transforming them into individuals who valued good manners, sportsmanship, honour, grace, and confident humility. Sports were the means to turn boys to men, transform Indianness into whiteness, and develop class character from “depravity.”<sup>6</sup> Until recently, Canadian scholarship considering the involvement of First Nations in sport has been limited and sparse. Janice Forsythe and Audrey Giles have recently edited a collection that they assert is the only book that explores the relationship between First Nations peoples and sport in Canada.<sup>7</sup> The authors argue that the subject is understudied but emerging as “an important lens through which to examine issues of individual and community health, gender and race

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illustration of the “Lazy Indian” stereotype, see chapter three “Making the Lazy Indian” in John Lutz’s *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the literature that exists consist of special issues in academic journals, including the *Journal of Sports History* (2008), *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* (2007), *International Journal of the History of Sport* (2006), and the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (2005). Forsyth and Giles also point to several dissertations written in the 2000s.

relations, culture and colonialism, and self-determination and agency....”<sup>8</sup> In her contribution to the collection, Forsyth argues that in residential schools, physical training, physical education, and sport encouraged the integration of First Nations individuals to “civil” European society by instructing them on the values of good citizenship, patriotic values, respect for discipline, deference to official authority, and appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors.<sup>9</sup> Colonial officials hoped that athletics would instill a competitive spirit among students which would find its way everyday life. They hoped that by fostering a desire for individual achievement the young would disparage traditional values that emphasized the well-being of the entire community, thereby ultimately undermining the foundation of indigenous societies.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Forsyth argues that sports and games were encouraged as a means of bringing native and non-native populations into contact, further fostering assimilation into mainstream Euro-Canadian society.<sup>11</sup>

Colonialism can be interpreted as a means of governance, defined by political philosopher Michel Foucault as “a form of activity aiming to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of some persons or persons.”<sup>12</sup> In the context of colonialism, Canadian government and society strove to change the conduct of First Nations peoples, by encouraging them to emulate Euro-Canadian culture and society. Historians have often focused on Canada’s prohibitory efforts

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<sup>8</sup> Janice Forsyth and Audrey R. Giles, eds., *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Janice Forsyth, “Bodies of Meaning: Sports and Games at Canadian Residential Schools” in *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues*, Janice Forsyth and Audrey R. Giles, eds (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 22, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2-3.

in advancing this project, the funnelling of state power to say “no” to forbid First Nation practices – traditional economic models and strategies, political organization, religious expression, marriage and divorce customs, prestige generation (such as the practice of horse raiding on the Plains and the potlatch on the Pacific Coast), and even traditional medicine. Such studies predominately focused on the repression of these practices through the punitive power of the law, Indian Agents, and the Department of Indian Affairs.<sup>13</sup> However, Foucault has argued the prohibitory application of power is insufficient in keeping citizens – or would-be citizens – invested in the State and the society that it tries to propagate. To accomplish this goal, there has to be an element of pleasure, an incentive to obey, which cannot be provided by prohibition alone.<sup>14</sup> Anthropologist Paul Nadasdy has illustrated the importance of the State offering incentives to First Nations peoples in advancing assimilative agendas. Nadasdy argues that today the Canadian government offers northern First Nations peoples such as the Kluane the opportunity to participate in formulating conservation policy. If the Kluane refuse to provide traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous cultural perspectives, government bureaucracies will craft conservation policies regardless, which will likely damage Kluane

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<sup>13</sup> An example of such historical monographs are Keith D. Smith’s *Liberalism, Surveillance, and Resistance* (economic models and political organization); Katherine Pettipas’ *Severing the Ties That Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994) (Religious expression and the Potlatch); Sarah Carter’s *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation-building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton: University of Edmonton Press, 2008) (Marriage and divorce customs); Shelly Gavigan’s *Hunger, Horses, and Government Men: Criminal Law on the Aboriginal Plains, 1970-1905* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012) (Economic models and strategies and prestige generation via horse raiding on the plains); and Maureen Lux’s *Medicine That Walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) (Traditional medicine).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 119, 141. Foucault eloquently expresses this idea by stating “...Power would be a fragile thing if its only function was to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage, and repression, in the manner of the great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire...” in *Ibid.*, 59.



interests. However, participation in such processes demand that the Kluane adopt the language of science, law, and bureaucracy, as well the erection of organizations that mirror government agencies, a process that he describes as “bureaucratization.” Nadasdy concludes that this actually undermines what he perceives as traditional Kluane culture by changing language and thought – which he ultimately considers the bedrock of culture – and prevents members of the community from actually performing activities vital to their way of life.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is implicitly encourages assimilation by facilitating widespread and close interaction with broader Euro-Canadian government and society.

Sport has the potential to do the same by offering pleasure through the joy of physical movement, exuberant competition, and social activity. The allure of fun through games and the thrill of competition offered by sport is often inviting and difficult for individuals to resist – and certainly would not be viewed with the lens of suspicion that more abrasive agents of prohibition would provoke. In the recent TRC Executive Summary, former residential school students expressed that physical activity and sport were bright spots in a world that was otherwise dull, depressing, and sometimes abusive. Some of the strongest and most positive memories of residential school survivors are connected to sports, which made their lives bearable.<sup>16</sup> It would not be a stretch to suggest that students remained engaged with residential schools or sought later interaction with Euro-Canadian communities solely due to the pleasure offered by athletics, which government officials and missionaries openly declared had a role to play in the process of First Nation assimilation. Given that repressive mechanisms

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<sup>15</sup> See Paul Nadasdy’s *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in the Southwest Yukon* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> TRC, “Honouring the Past,” 112-116.

often elicited widespread resistance in First Nation communities, sport may have had a significant but underestimated impact in this process.

This Ethnohistory Field School report does not explicitly address the broad question of sport in the Canadian colonial process. That would be an enormous – and likely undoable – project in the span of four to six weeks of research. Additionally, this was not the question that the community asked of me. How I interpreted my meeting with Darwin Douglas was that he wanted several broad questions answered: who participated in boxing, where did they do so, what motivated them to partake, and did the sport have a positive impact on their lives. The first question will be addressed by means of a spreadsheet which will identify all the Aboriginal boxers that I discovered through the course of my research. This spreadsheet will be deposited into the archives of the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Center. The others will be addressed in this report, in consideration of the relationship of sport between sport and the Canadian colonial project.

The history of boxing in Stó:lō territory is a topic that no historian has tackled in detail, although the recent TRC Executive Summary has highlighted that boxing dominated residential school sports programs in North Vancouver.<sup>17</sup> As such, this project is heavily reliant on original primary research. My major source has been the newspaper *The Chilliwack Progress*, which has been digitized and uploaded to the World Wide Web. The *Progress* has allowed me to find out who Aboriginal boxers were, when they participated, and the details of their achievements. It has also allowed me to identify when interest and support for boxing has ebbed and flowed, allowing me to identify broad eras that have existed. *The Chilliwack Progress* has been

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 115.

instrumental to addressing my first and second questions. However, it has often not been helpful in offering explanations as to why people participated or if it had a positive impact on their lives. To answer these questions, I have turned to oral histories that I gathered in the Stó:lō community. I have interviewed five individuals who boxed themselves or have known boxers and heard stories from them. My first three informants represent the former, being Alan Campbell (Tsulsimat), Albert “Chester Douglas,” and Ray Silver, Sr. (Xéytéleq). Alan Campbell found his start in the sport at North Vancouver’s St. Paul’s Residential School and boxed with the powerhouse boxing club, Totem AC in the 1950s and early 1960s. Chester Douglas fought out of several boxing clubs in the 1960s and early-1970s, regularly participating in Golden Gloves tournaments in British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. In 1970 he secured a spot as Commonwealth Games and later on in the decade coached youth amateur boxing. While Ray Silver Sr.’s involvement in boxing was primarily as a coach and organizer for the MSA Boxing Club and Fraser Valley Boxing Club in the late-1970s and early 1980s, he also boxed in the hop yards and in logging camps as a young man in the 1940s and 50s. My other two interviewees were Stan McKay and Louis Julian of the Matsqui area. I had travelled to Matsqui to interview Brian Tommy, brother of Kenny Tommy, a 1966 Golden Gloves champion who, sadly, has passed on. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances Brian was unable to meet that day. Being new to conducting interviews, I was anxious to practice and decided to talk to Stan and Louis, despite them believing that they had little to say about boxing. They need not have worried about that as they offered a community perspective outside of direct participation in the sport. While health issues prevented Stan from formally participating, he was friends with many boxers at Cultus, Sumas, and Matsqui. He often took in amateur boxing tournaments and

other fight cards. He also did little informal training in the backyard rings and boxing clubs where his friends congregated. Louis represents a generation (being born in 1977) that was not familiar with amateur boxing in the Fraser Valley. However, he had heard stories about how popular it had been and had casually spoken with John Silver, a decorated Golden Gloves and Buckskin Gloves fighter in the late-1970s and early- 1980s, about it. I have supplemented my research with records from the Chilliwack Museum and Archives and the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper.

It is important to note here that I do not intend for this report to be *the* history of boxing in Stó:lō territory but merely *a* history of it. Since I have used *The Chilliwack Progress* as the cornerstone of my primary research, my report is seen through the lens of Chilliwack. Examining boxing from this perspective only offers one piece of the puzzle as sports journalists often reported on those events that happened locally. There were several instances in the

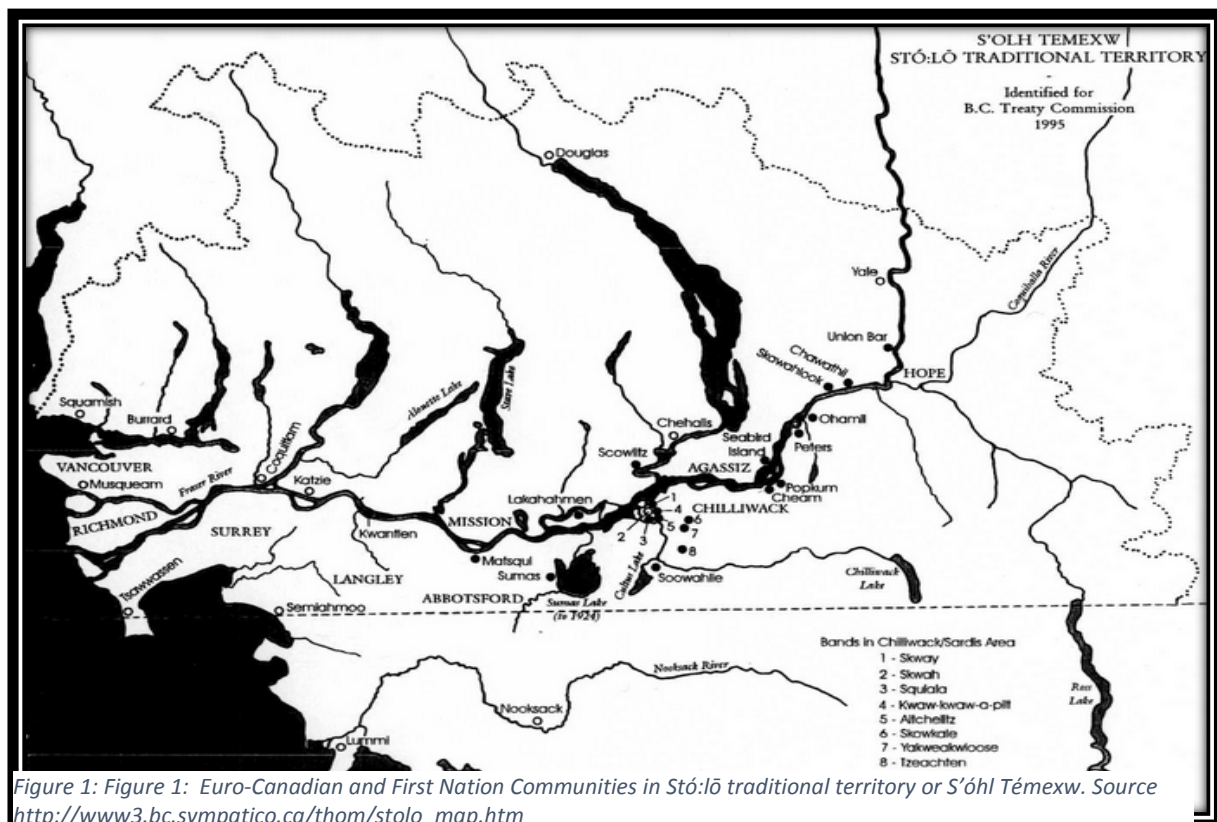


Figure 1: Figure 1: Euro-Canadian and First Nation Communities in Stó:lō traditional territory or S'ólh Témexw. Source [http://www3.bc.sympatico.ca/thom/stolo\\_map.htm](http://www3.bc.sympatico.ca/thom/stolo_map.htm)

course of my research where Chilliwack writers would report on a local event, make mention of another boxing competition in another municipality in the same article, and then never follow-up as to the results. I believe that since the *Progress* was interested in boosting the image of the city of Chilliwack through its local sports scene, it was not necessarily concerned with what happened in other municipalities. Making Vancouver, Langley, Abbotsford, or Hope the center of research would likely change the narrative of the history of boxing in Stó:lō territory profoundly. To really capture the full story of the sport, one would have to examine more of the newspapers of towns and cities in S'óhl Témexw (see Figure 1). The records of several residential schools – at the very least those with very prolific boxing programs such as St. Paul's in the Vancouver area and St. Mary's at Mission – need to be examined to offer a more complete history. Another factor that makes this only a partial history is that there are many boxers that have not yet been interviewed, including members of very prolific boxing families

**BOXING SHOW**  
 EVERGREEN HALL — CHILLIWACK, B.C.  
**Saturday, Dec. 14th**

156 lbs. **Chester Douglas** (Rosedale) Runner-up Canadian Championship 1968.  
 156 lbs. **Ken Tommy** (Langley) Golden Gloves Champ 1966.  
 126 lbs. **Ricky Zuest** (Langley) Runner-up Bronze Gloves Championship 1968.  
 119 lbs. **Derek Austin** (Langley) 3 years B.C. 112 lb. Champ. Runner-up at Expo 1967.  
 106 lbs. **Niel Austin** (Langley) Emerald Gloves Champ 5 years in a row.  
 90 lbs. **Arnold Kelly** (Langley) Bronze Gloves Champ 1968, Bronze Boy 1968.  
 90 lbs. **Eric Stienberg** (Langley) Emerald Gloves Champ 1966.  
 65 lbs. **Ricky Eedy** (Langley) Bronze Gloves Champ 1968.  
 55 lbs. **Guffy Jakes** (Langley) Pacific North West Champ 1967  
**Opponents** will probably be a Crack Negro Team from Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.

such as the Commodores and the Tommys. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly true that not all boxers that can be identified as Aboriginal have been so as of yet. The *Progress* did not always designate First Nations people as such, which is problematic as they have surnames similar to Euro-Canadian ones. For example, Norm

Commodore – the son of Andy Commodore, a Golden Gloves competitor and B.C. Provincial Champion – is only designated as an “Indian” in two of the many articles written about him in the late-1940s. This is not problematic for events such as the Buckskin Gloves because all the

competitors had to be Status Indians to compete. However, for tournaments that welcomed competitors of all ethnicities, identifying First Nations individuals is difficult. What was extremely helpful for me, as a community outsider, was having my interviewees identify who was Aboriginal from tournament results and boxing announcements (see figure 2). While I am confident that I have made a good start in identifying Stó:lō and other Salish boxers from the late-1940s until the early-1980s, there is much to do in identifying them in the decades beforehand, if it can be done at all. There is much research to do before a history of boxing in Stó:lō territory can be considered definitive.

To offer a preliminary answer as to the various contexts of aboriginal boxing, although matches occurred in the hop yards and at various Euro-Canadian festivals<sup>18</sup> in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s it was participation in B.C. amateur boxing that constituted a “golden age” of Stó:lō boxing from 1946 until the early-1980s. Youth from the ages of 10 (and sometimes even younger) to 21 joined community boxing clubs, learned the technique of scientific boxing, and participated in multi-ethnic boxing tournaments to crown the best fighters. Out of the formation of amateur boxing clubs came the Buckskin Gloves tournament in 1949, which showcased Aboriginal talent exclusively. These two day affairs featured not only boxing but other forms of entertainment. An annual event having a run of nearly 30 years, the tournament came to attract First Nation pugilists from B.C., Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. As to why these youth chose to participate, interviewees expressed

*Figure 2: Boxing Announcement 1968. Note that Chester Douglas, Ken Tommy, and Arnold Kelly are not explicitly labelled as having First Nations ancestry, a common occurrence in the newspaper. Source: The Chilliwack Progress, December 4, 1968.*

that they boxed for the reasons of money, compliance, survival, good health, and

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<sup>18</sup> These include the Chilliwack Cherry Carnival, Douglas Sasquatch Days, and Hope’s Annual Founding Day Fair.

notoriety. I will illustrate these meanings by providing short vignettes on the experiences of Alan Campbell, Chester Douglas, and Ray Silver Sr. with the sport. Finally, boxing was positively a boon for indigenous communities, allowing them to mitigate the negative impacts of mainstream colonial society.

### **From Hop Yards to the Buckskin Gloves: Boxing in S'óhl Témexw**

For this research project, I downloaded 225 files from *The Chilliwack Progress* digitized collection that made mention of the participation of native peoples in boxing or helped establish background information on boxing clubs and their founders from 1912 until 1987. Of these 225, 212 are the former, being either an article, a photograph, or an announcement of a boxing event that suggest indigenous involvement. From 1882 – when the *Progress* began publishing – until 1911, there is no definitive proof that Aboriginal peoples were involved in boxing at all. Until 1944, there are a mere 11 mentions, with evidence suggesting that Fraser Valley First Nations were exposed to boxing in September 1912, when the *Progress* reported on the annual fair. A large crowd of Euro-Canadians and Aboriginal peoples came together to take in the two day event, which included a boxing tournament. There is no word as to the ethnicity of the boxers.<sup>19</sup> The very first confirmation that native peoples were actually participating in the sport was in October 1923, when the paper reported that “the local Indians and the other Indians here for the hop picking held their annual sports day on Sunday,” indicating that this was not the first time such an event had occurred. It was a full sports programme that included

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<sup>19</sup> “Chilliwack’s 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Fair Passed into History Last Week,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, September 25, 1912.

“some very good boxing matches.”<sup>20</sup> Recognition of the annual sports day at the hop fields was sporadic and it was not until 1928 and 1929 that it received a mention again. The latter event was described as being a multiethnic event at Sumas Prairies. “Canadians and Mennonites, Japanese, Chinese, and Indians” took in an afternoon of “Indian war dances, dances of the medicine men, wrestling and boxing, characteristic Indian songs, and the playing of the Indian game, lahal.”<sup>21</sup> The event was organized by Chief Mathias of the “Squamish Indians” and attracted several thousand spectators. Articles covering the sports day, meant to celebrate the end of the hops picking season continued to be sporadic, receiving only slight mentions in 1937 and 1938. Using the archival record, it is clear that Fraser Valley First Nations first participated in boxing at the time of the hops harvest.

Four of my interviewees offer support for this interpretation. When I suggested to Ray Silver Sr. and Chester Douglas that residential schools were the origin of Stó:lō boxing, I was corrected and informed it was in the hop yards. Ray Silver Sr. got his start in boxing by fighting at the Sumas hop yards, as well as in logging camps in the United States. Stan McKay and Alan Campbell accompanied their parents to the hop yards in the 1940s - the same time Ray was splitting collected purses with his opponents – noting that the sport was popular on the weekends during the picking season. Chester Douglas remembers that his father, the late Chief Albert Douglas, was a fight promotor and commented that serious amounts of betting took place “like [on] a dog fight.”<sup>22</sup> Stan stated that crowds collected money to pay the combatants

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<sup>20</sup> “Sardis,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, October 4, 1923.

<sup>21</sup> “Hop Picking Season Ideal,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, September 12, 1929. Lahal, or Slahal, refers to stick game played by many Pacific Coast peoples in Canada and the United States.

<sup>22</sup> Interview between Chester Douglas and Chris Marsh, May 20, 2015.



but as young man he was too young to take notice of betting; he was there to witness the excitement of the fight. None of my informants gave me detailed information as to the procedural aspects of the matches – length of rounds, boxing gear, layout of the ring, etc., though Ray suggested that there was some rough parity in weight between opponents, as fighters would offer to take on anyone that fit into a specific range.<sup>23</sup> Whether victories were based on a knock-out or by a system adjudicated by a neutral third party (like some kind of point system) is unclear and needs to be followed up on. It would be dependent on whether fighters at the hop yards had embraced British “gentlemanly,” scientific boxing as advocated by Queensbury Rules – featuring standardized weight classes, boxing gloves, the forbidding of grappling holds, and a disdain for wild slugfests – or a more American style characterized by a Chilliwack sports writer as “bloody and brutal.”<sup>24</sup> I suspect Fraser Valley Aboriginal people had been instructed in the former style. In an article that is the first to explicitly identify an Aboriginal fighter, one “Howard” fought in a special bout at the Chilliwack Drill Hall in October 1930. In the light-heavyweight bout, Howard was praised in victory for the lightness of his feet, his agility, and his strong jab.<sup>25</sup> A bloody, “beat-em-down” it was not; Howard was scientific boxer, not an uneducated brawler. Sports writers in Chilliwack often praised the gentlemanly and scientific nature of local boxing; had hop yards been bloody brawls, it likely would have been commented on as something that should have been brought to heel. At the second annual Coqualeetza Festival in 1977 – meant to be celebration of Stó:lō culture – there were

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<sup>23</sup> Interview between Ray Silver Sr. and Chris Marsh, May 26, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> See Kasia Boddy’s *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2008), 92-94 for the emergence of “gentlemanly” boxing; “Boxing Bout and Wrestling,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, May 10, 1911.

<sup>25</sup> “Boxing Bouts Staged by Game Coast Fighters,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, October 16, 1930.

contests based on hops picking and logging sports. Additionally, Ray supplied gloves and other equipment so that boxing could be practiced “as it was done in the hopyard days.”<sup>26</sup> Four men held up the ropes so that the boxers could ply their craft for the afternoon, suggesting that hop yards boxing was done in an improvised dirt ring.

In my first interview with Darwin concerning the known particulars regarding boxing in Stó:lō territory, I learned that residential schools had been a font of entry into the world of pugilism for many young people. While true for some, it is not universally so. Not all residential schools had boxing programs. At Coqualeetza, operated by the Methodist Church, Principal J.H. Ralry believed in the value of competition that athletics fostered. To him, it was essential to moral development and instructed students on how to harness the “Maximum of Effort” needed to be successful in so many facets of life. It also fostered friendly relationships and helped students achieve maximal physical health.<sup>27</sup> However, this ethos was advanced by a program of track and field, soccer, badminton, softball, baseball, and shooting in 1931.<sup>28</sup> Although Saanich student Felix Thomas Paul’s ambition was to become a prize-fighter<sup>29</sup> he would find no opportunity for such instruction at Coqualeetza. Over the next few years, the program of sports continued to exclude boxing. In 1939, Ray Silver Sr. would attend the school for a brief period; although he was involved in fisticuffs with many of the other boys, there was no formal program of boxing being administered by the school.<sup>30</sup> At St. George’s Residential School at Lytton, boys supervisor Ron Purvis noted that none of his students were formally

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<sup>26</sup> “Hundreds Attracted to Coqualeetza Meet,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, August 31, 1977.

<sup>27</sup> J.H. Ralry, “Foreword,” *Coqualeetza Yearbook, 1931*, Chilliwack Archives 2009.047.003.

<sup>28</sup> George Williams, “Coqualeetza Residential School Sports,” 1931, Chilliwack Archives AM 456.

<sup>29</sup> Student Profiles, *Coqualeetza Yearbook, 1931*, Chilliwack Archives 2009.047.003.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ray Silver Sr.

trained in boxing. This was demonstrated when he was able to eradicate an informal hierarchy based on fist-fighting among the boys by using his own boxing training to beat the number one “tough boy” in a match at the school gym. This ban lasted from 1945 until at least 1959, when Purvis’ tenure at the school ended. This led to bullying and some beatings at the hands of some of the town boys – who had such training – when St. George’s students attended the local high school. Rather than giving instruction in boxing, Purvis opted for a system of self-defence that was a combination of throwing and French savate.<sup>31</sup>

The schools with the most notable boxing programs were St. Paul’s in North Vancouver and St. Mary’s at Mission, whose students were often very visible in the results of amateur tournaments in the 1950s and 60s. St. Paul’s program got its start in 1947 after naval veteran Alex Strain volunteered to take charge of the school’s athletic program. Putting in four days a week on a volunteer basis, Strain established a tumbling team, then a boxing team.<sup>32</sup> The rise of the boxing program in North Vancouver coincided with the development of amateur boxing in the Chilliwack area between 1946 and the early 1950s; within four years, St. Paul’s boxers had won more than 100 trophies. St. Mary’s experienced similar success but its origins are more ephemeral. Recalling her time at the school from 1940 until 1943, a Sister Mary Lucille declared that the successes of the boys in Golden Gloves boxing tournaments contributed to burgeoning trophy cabinets.<sup>33</sup> If this timeline is accurate, it points to the rise of amateur boxing in the

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<sup>31</sup> Ron Purvis, *T’Shama, is an Indian Word Loosely Meaning “White Man, Staff, or Authority.”* (Surrey, B.C.: Heritage House Publishing Company Ltd., 1994), 6-7, 44-45.

<sup>32</sup> TRC, “Honouring the Past,” 114-115.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Glavin and the Students of St. Mary’s, *Amongst God’s Own: The Enduring Legacies of St. Mary’s Mission* (Mission, B.C.: Longhouse Publishing, 2002).

Fraser Valley at an earlier time. More inquiry into the programs at both schools is required for a more definitive history of boxing in Stó:lō territory.

From 1946 until about 1966 is what I like to call the “golden age” of amateur boxing in Stó:lō territory, extending from the Vancouver area along the Fraser Valley up to Hope. The period saw the rise of boxing clubs in most municipalities, widespread youth participation in amateur boxing under the auspices of the B.C. Boxing Association, a high level of achievement, and the rise of the spectacle dubbed the Buckskin gloves. Altogether, this period is responsible for 142 mentions regarding boxing and First Nations participants out of a total 212. The period 1950 to 1959 holds 61 mentions alone, making it the most active decade for Aboriginal boxing in *The Chilliwack Progress*. Had the local Chilliwack boxing club had more financial, organizational, and community support (it had massive trouble staging its own events in the second half of the decade) coverage of the sport likely would have been more frequent. As stated before, the *Progress* was rather myopic in its sport coverage – unless there was a big Chilliwack-area star athlete involved or the city was hosting a boxing show, the paper often did not cover it. As Chilliwack’s boxing club languished throughout the 1950s and then vanished in 1962, it tended to only cover the Buckskin Gloves tournament when local fighters were involved. A different perspective on the vitality of Aboriginal amateur boxing in the Fraser Valley would have likely emerged had the center of this study been on North Vancouver or Mission, which had higher profile clubs – the Totem AC and St. Mary’s Mission respectively – that demonstrated greater dominance of the sport.

The type of boxing that was most prevalent among Stó:lō and other Salish people was amateur boxing, the type of boxing that is watched during the Olympic Games in the

contemporary era. It is regulated by rules affecting match protocol, equipment, and the conduct of the fighters; additionally, it is highly organized, with specific tournaments being held annually to crown a champion. These tournaments are tiered by region, age, and proficiency. The Bronze Gloves, Silver Gloves, and Golden Gloves tournaments are dependent on these latter two considerations. In a historical context, these demarcations are still hazy. The Silver Gloves and Golden Gloves seem to have been determined by age, with fighters below 15 or 16 being directed to the Silver Gloves,<sup>34</sup> while those over fought for the honour of being called “Golden Boy.” In the more recent era, fighters have had to fulfill an experience quota, only being able to enter the higher-tier upon fighting a requisite number of matches in inter-club or club-versus-club boxing shows. The Bronze Gloves seems to have represented a demarcation of ability within the other tiers, as the tournament was only open to those who had never won or been runner-up in a recognized tournament.<sup>35</sup> More research – possibly into the records of B.C. Boxing Association itself – is necessary to clarify these requirements of entry. However, it is clear that the Golden Gloves was the most prestigious. In all tournaments there was a champion and runner-up for each weight class, a grand title for the best boxer in show (the Bronze, Silver, or Golden “boy”), and a myriad of special awards – Best Fight in Show, Most Aggressive, Best Left-Hand, Most Scientific, Quickest Knockout, Best Prospect, Most Sportsmanlike, Best Built Boy, The “Hard-Luck Loser” (a boxer who demonstrated grit and determination in a losing effort due to bad luck such as injury) among others. A tournament’s “Boy,” according to Alan Campbell, was in part a matter of some subjectivity among judges.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview between Alan Campbell and Chris Marsh, May 26, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> “Five Local Boys Enter Bronze Gloves,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 26, 1950.

They were always champions of their respective divisions but taken into consideration was also how many matches they had fought and the calibre of their opponents. Some divisions had fewer participants than others – making for a longer road to victory – or opponents that may have not been up to snuff with the eventual champion, making for a much easier time when compared to others.<sup>36</sup> Special awards allowed for the recognition of ability and other virtues (such as gentlemanly conduct, best built, most scientific); even if they were not tops in their field, which helped instill confidence and provide for motivation to continue their participation.

Tournaments were also tiered regionally, with associations at the sub-provincial level holding tournaments of their own, whose winners and runners-up would go on to compete at the provincial level, then larger regional and national levels. For example, in September 1921, representatives from Chilliwack, Hope, Mission, Haney, Hammond, Cloverdale, and Kennedy petitioned the B.C. Amateur Boxing Association, asking permission to form the Fraser Valley Boxing Association. This would allow the region to hold boxing tournaments to declare their own champions, as well as sanction their own shows in the Fraser Valley, making it unnecessary to seek permission from governing bodies on the coast.<sup>37</sup> Thus, a hallmark of amateur boxing is bureaucracy, in which there is a hierarchical organization where bodies at lower levels defer to the authority of those above them. When Ray Silver Sr. coached the Fraser Valley Boxing Club in the late 1970s, he considered bureaucratization the most infuriating aspect of the sport. He felt that he had to constantly grovel to higher-level bodies in order to offer his developing boxers high-level training and enriching experiences. In September 1978, Ray took his club to

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.

<sup>37</sup> "Vote to Form FV Boxing Association," *The Chilliwack Progress*, September 21, 1949.

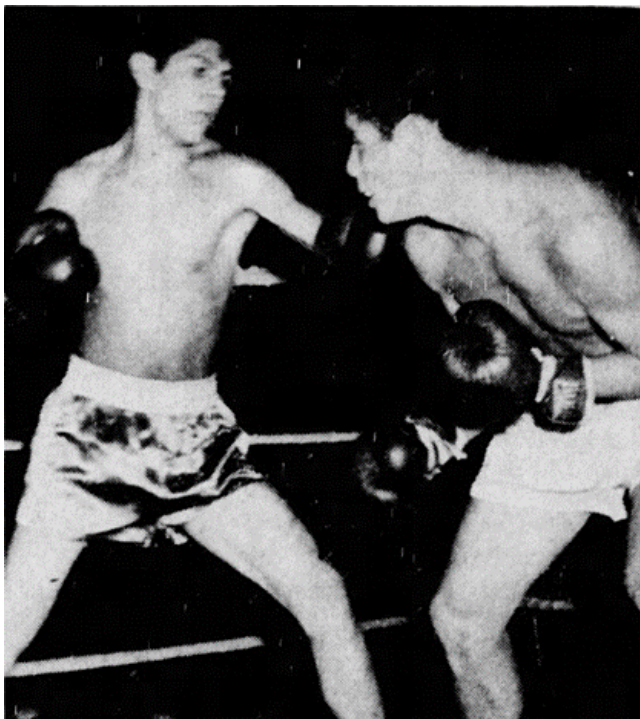
Sacramento, California for a tournament, where they won the grand trophy for best team in show. Upon his return, instead of focusing on the team's outstanding achievement against other talented North American clubs, he was berated by B.C. boxing officials for having not sought permission to take the team in the first place. This incident, as well as other run-ins with the bureaucracy, influenced Ray's decision to get out of the amateur boxing game despite his successes.<sup>38</sup> The presence of amateur boxing bureaucracy illustrates how sport can be vehicle of assimilation, as it attempts to normalize the values of the dominant culture. In this case, Western culture often advances the idea that tiered hierarchy – in which some individuals are superior to others – is natural, even inevitable, and unthinking deference to authority is desirable. Elements of both these values is evident in amateur boxing bureaucracy in its “Just-do-what-we-want-you-do” attitude and this message was disseminated to participants through their mere involvement.

The matches fought by First Nation youth were regulated by rules imposed by the B.C. Amateur Boxing Association and its successor entities. A winner was determined by knockout, technical knock-out, or a decision by a judge or panel of judges as to who scored more legal blows. Matches were of three rounds of three minutes each duration, with one minute between rounds, a protocol that was endured since the early-1950s – based on the testimony of Alan Campbell – and prevails today. Alan Campbell and Chester Douglas both declared that although a three-minute round does not sound like a lot, when one is participating in the ring it feels like an eternity. As such, both reiterated that physical training, especially of the cardiovascular variety through running, sparring, and heavy bag work-outs, was fundamental to

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<sup>38</sup> “Valley Boxes Tops on the USA,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, September 13, 1978; Interview with Ray Silver Sr.

be successful. Although the youth may have only focused specifically on boxing training 2-4 times a week, road work or biking was something that needed to be done nearly every day. Chester declared that he went jogging daily and gives credit to the sport for helping him trim down the extra weight he carried as a young teenager.<sup>39</sup> Stan McKay remembers his cousin Kenny Tommy – who would become a Golden Gloves champ in the sixties – always doing roadwork. Everyday Stan would see Kenny pounding the pavement as he was getting on the bus to go to school; on some of those days, he would get off the bus and see Kenny riding his bike.<sup>40</sup> Surviving three rounds called for other kinds of toughness as well, which sometimes



called for training that seems unorthodox or even cruel to a ring outsider. Alan Campbell was proud of his rock-hard stomach as a youth, which was cultivated by having a medicine ball thrown into his gut or by taking a punch thrown by his mentor, Alex Strain, who he otherwise regarded as a “top notch coach.”<sup>41</sup> Fighters also fought in strict weight categories; if one was too heavy, it would result in

disqualification from a bout or tournament, which was determined by a weigh-in. However, Alan Campbell stated that boxers could fight in a higher weight class, which he often did as he

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Chester Douglas.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Stan McKay.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.



was small. He declare that as he got older it offered better competition. At Totem AC, his home boxing club, Alan remembers training by fighting heavier boys frequently, therefore going up a weight class was not a big deal to him.<sup>42</sup> Boxers also had to wear regulation boxing gloves, and as time went on, boxing headgear. It is not clear when headgear was officially mandated but it can be seen by photographic

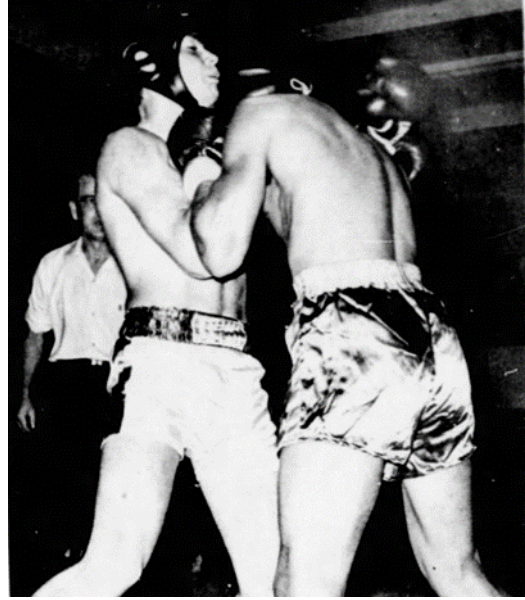
evidence as occurring between 1961 (see Figure 3)

and 1968 (see Figure 4). Alan stated that by 1962, the

year that he retired, that he had never worn a helmet. Throughout the fifties, young boxers fought with their heads unprotected, which likely influenced Alan's opinion that that boxing may not have been a suitable sport for young people as it could cause severe concussions that "could mess you up for the rest of your life."<sup>43</sup>

The constraints of space here does not allow for a thorough recounting the history of the various Chilliwack-area boxing clubs and the individuals who participated in the sport. Instead, I will illustrate some broad trends that existed from the mid-1940s until the early 1980s. In 1946, Bruce and Don Gleig, proprietors of the Gleig Brothers Sporting Goods Store,

*Figure 3: Aboriginal boxer Carman Prest, left, competes without headgear in 1961. Source: The Chilliwack Progress, December 12, 1961.*



*Figure 4: Chester Douglas, left, of Cheam/Rosedale competes with a helmet 7 years later in 1968. Source: The Chilliwack Progress, October 9, 1968.*

began training local boys at the newly christened Chilliwack Boxing Club. Born in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5: Norm Commodore being awarded his Fraser Valley Golden Boy Award in 1950. Source: *The Chilliwack Progress*, February 15, 1950.

1906, Bruce Gleig was originally an Englishman who had immigrated to Canada in 1924 and arrived in the Chilliwack area in 1931. In 1925, Gleig had become a B.C. amateur lightweight champion and opened his business in 1938.<sup>44</sup> Over the course of the next few years, Gleig's club was busy, being

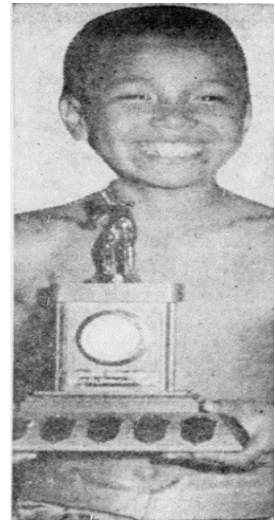
instrumental in forming the Fraser Valley Boxing Association and staging several house shows at the Agricultural Hall in Chilliwack. It was at this club the first prominent Stó:lō boxers achieved a measure of success and recognition. Norman Commodore, described by the newspaper as a "Vedder Crossing Indian," would go on to win the Golden Boy title in the 175-pound class at the very first Golden Gloves tournament held in Chilliwack under the auspices of the Fraser Valley Boxing Association in February 1951, a title that was three years in the making (see Figure 5). Norm's younger brothers Billy and Earl would also train at the club, among the first in a long line of Stó:lō boxers.

However, after Norm won the Golden Boy title, he seemed to fade away from the amateur boxing scene, as did the fortunes of the Chilliwack Boxing Club itself. It struggled following a very active first five years. After hosting the Golden Gloves tournament again in 1952, the club surprisingly became inactive in 1953, leaving Billy and Earl Commodore the lone

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<sup>44</sup> "Community Worker Bruce Gleig Dies," *The Chilliwack Progress*, December 3, 1975.

Chilliwack area competitors – but bereft of club sponsorship – in the Buckskin Gloves tournament held that year. Earl surprised by taking his 160-pound division and being the runner-up Buckskin Boy while his brother Billy received a Best Match commendation for a losing effort against Freddy Baker of Totem AC, the very first Buckskin Boy in 1951 and a Buckskin champion in 1952.<sup>45</sup> Andy Commodore, Norman’s father, stepped up to fill the role of trainer and coach at the club in 1953, a role that he performed into the early 1960s.<sup>46</sup> Andy had always been proactive in training his own sons, being instrumental in their success.<sup>47</sup> In 1956, Chilliwack hosted the Fraser Valley Golden Gloves for what appears to be the last time. Andy Commodore attempted to organize another in 1961 but the effort fell through because he had difficulty attracting the administrative assistance that would have made it viable.<sup>48</sup> From the early-1950s and until mid-1960s, the Chilliwack Boxing Club and its successor – the Vedder Boxing Club run by Commodore and Gerry Perry – focused on developing young amateur boxers rather than hosting tournaments. In hanging around with Commodore’s grandsons, Stan McKay witnessed the elder Commodore’s efforts in coaching Larry and Barry, stating that the family had erected a backyard ring at their home near Cultus!<sup>49</sup> Some of the boxers developed by the two boxing clubs include Buddy Joseph, George James, Russell Williams (whose sister, Rosie, would marry Alan Campbell), Earl Williams, Ed Williams, Chris Coombes, Percy Roberts Clarence Ned, Chuck Jimmie, Chester



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<sup>45</sup> “Commodore Boys Take Two Buckskin Trophies,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 15, 1953.

<sup>46</sup> “City Boxing Club Revived at Ag Hall,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, October 21, 1953; “Speaking of Sports,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, February 10, 1954.

<sup>47</sup> “Sportsman Honored,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, August 19, 1987.

<sup>48</sup> “Boxing Plans Fall Through,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, March 21, 1961.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Stan McKay.



Figure 7: Winner of the Seventh Annual Buckskin Gloves, Eddie Campbell, 17, get a peck on the cheek from Shirley Pettis, 21, the Miss Totem Princess while holding the Buckskins Gloves trophy. Source: *Vancouver Sun*, February 11, 1957

Douglas, Syd Douglas, Mark Point, and Steven Point (see figure 6). While Chilliwack clubs were producing fighters that gave good competition and occasionally won the various Gloves tournaments, St. Paul's Residential School - turned Totem Athletic Club in 1953 – was dominating them, especially the Buckskin Gloves. Alex Strain helped produce champions such as Freddy Baker and Eddie Campbell,

proclaimed the “Totem Tiger,” “Musqueam Mauler,” and “Red Bomber” by the *Vancouver Sun* in 1957. Campbell (see Figure 7) won his weight division from 1950 until 1952 and was all-around Boy three years in a row starting in 1955.<sup>50</sup> The Buckskin Gloves 1952 tournament was emblematic of St. Paul's/Totem AC hegemony in its first decade, installing its students as champions in 11 out of 13 weight class categories. The children of the Nahanee and the Campbell families led the way, the former producing four champions that year.<sup>51</sup> Competition became more intense as the decade went on, with other boxing clubs winning honours more often, a potent challenger being St, Mary's at Mission, who produced Buckskin and Golden Gloves competitors Larry Point, Sandy Bull, and Junior Bull. Other notable boxers that began their development in the mid-sixties were Kenny and Ernie Tommy from Matsqui and Arnold, John, and Hugh Kelly from

Figure 6: A young Steve Point, then of the Vedder Boxing Club, 1961. Source: *The Chilliwack Progress*, September 15, 1961

<sup>50</sup> “Buckskin Boy: Title belongs to Campbell,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 11, 1957; Emery Louis, “B.C. Indians Top Boxers: The Story of the Buckskin Glove Tournament,” *Indian World Magazine* Vol.3, no. 1 (April, 1980),

<sup>51</sup> “Braves Lose Bucks: Indians Thrill Fans,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 21, 1952.

Sumas. According to the *Progress*, Arnold was the Bronze Boy in 1968, while Kenny earned the admiration of the people on his reserve by taking the Golden Gloves title in his weight class in 1966. Stan McKay sometimes watched Kenny, both at the gym and in shows, and remembers the community of Matsqui being very happy for and proud of their son.<sup>52</sup> Both trained out of the Langley Boxing Club by 1968.

Starting in 1962, there was a tremendous slowdown in the reporting of amateur boxing in the Chilliwack area, coinciding with the closure of the club. In our interview, Chester Douglas informed me that the Vedder Boxing Club closed when he was twelve. After taking a four year hiatus, Chester returned after attending a Golden Gloves tournament as a spectator. Believing that he could beat all the fighters he had seen there, he began to train at the Langley and Surrey Boxing Clubs.<sup>53</sup> By 1968, Chester had competed in the Canadian Championships in Edmonton but lost out in the finals. In the meantime, Chilliwack's boxing scene continued to stagnate. In 1966 former resident Tom Deagau told the newspaper that he wished to revive the fight scene by bringing one of the boxing shows he was promoting to the city.<sup>54</sup> However, boxing shows did not actually return to the Ag Center until 1968, which was promoted by the Langley Boxing Club. There seemed to be little interest in showcasing the talents of developing

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<sup>52</sup> "Boxing Show" Advertisement, *The Chilliwack Progress*, December 4, 1968; Interview with Stan MacKay.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Chester Douglas.

<sup>54</sup> "Former City Man Revives Fight Game," *The Chilliwack Progress*, November 2, 1966.



amateur boxers as they did in the past. They featured already established fighters such as Chester Douglas, who had recently been runner-up at the Canadian Championships on Edmonton, and his brother Sydney, a Buckskin and Golden Gloves champ in the 1960s. It seems that shows were trying to generate money by headlining good fighters that were already known and on their way

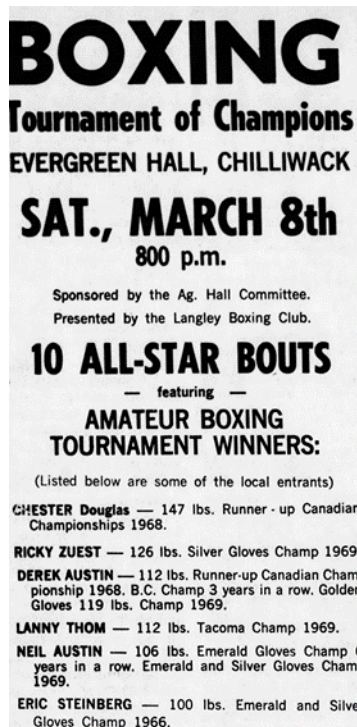


Figure 8: An example of an amateur boxing card in the late-1960s. Most of these shows leaned towards to showcasing already established boxers, a deviation from shows in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Source: *The Chilliwack Progress*, March 5, 1969

to the top, such as Chester. While there was smattering of uncrowned talent in

the 1968 shows, by March 1969 the Ag Hall Committee was advertising a show dubbed the “Tournament of Champions,” featuring Chester Douglas (see Figure 8). No developing talent was promoted at all, a stark contrast to previous decades. Boxing withered again in 1970, as Chester seemed to withdraw from local boxing shows, perhaps due to the death of his father, Chief of Cheam Albert Douglas, in October 1969 and then in advance of his preparation for the Commonwealth Games. By 1971, the *Progress* again noted the shrinking interest in amateur boxing,

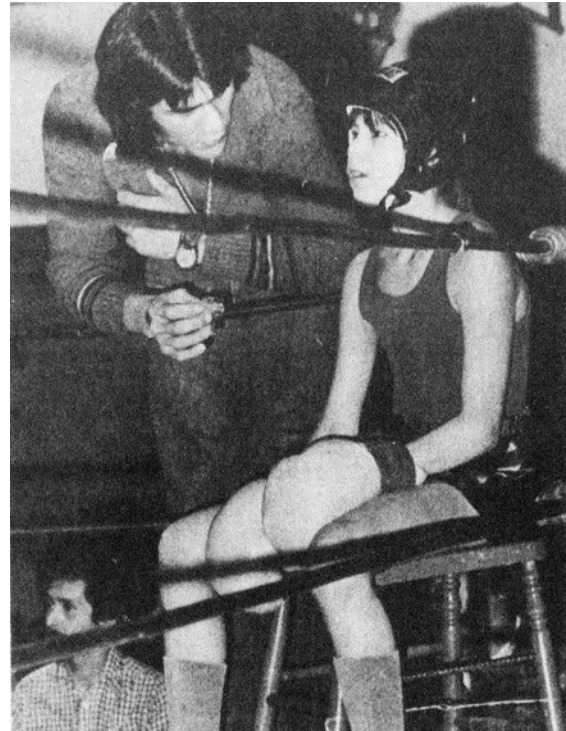


Figure 9: Ambie Silver gets some advice from his coach, Chester Douglas, between rounds as he squares off against his brother John at a house show in Chilliwack put on by the Fraser Valley Boxing Club. Source: *The Chilliwack Progress*, February 1, 1978

confirming a several years period of inactivity. After a poorly attended show in April 1972, one

in which Chester was advertised for but cancelled on, amateur boxing completely died out in Chilliwack.<sup>55</sup> It was not until 1977 that a boxing show returned, an effort spearheaded by the MSA Boxing Club of Sumas under Ray Silver Sr. Chester Douglas (see Figure 9) coached the boxers and in 1978 – with the club being rechristened as the Fraser Valley Boxing Club – four shows highlighting the talents of young boxers took place, producing talented fighters such as John and Ambie Silver. In 1979, Ray embarked on his trip to Sacramento that pushed his patience for amateur sport bureaucracy to the limit. By 1981, the sport had sputtered out in Chilliwack once again. Born in 1977, Louis Julian never experienced the thrill of community supported boxing in the Stó:lō homeland; instead, soccer would be the sport of choice when he was a youth.<sup>56</sup>

The Buckskin Gloves tournament was without a doubt the greatest venue for Aboriginal boxers in Stó:lō territory. Although house shows exhibited the talents of Aboriginal fighters and it is clear from the archival record that they fought in the Bronze, Silver, and Golden Gloves, in our interview Alan Campbell characterized them as “white” spaces where Aboriginal contenders were vastly outnumbered. When Alan went to the 1957 Canadian Championships in Camrose, Alberta, he stated that only two members of the team – himself from Totem AC and Richard Edwards from St. Mary’s – were native. Everybody else on his team was white, as were most of the competitors on the whole.<sup>57</sup> The Buckskins showcased native boxing talent exclusively, getting its start at St. Paul’s school under the leadership of Alex Strain in 1949. The

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<sup>55</sup> “Chilliwack Lions Sponsors Boxing,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, January 19, 1972; “Bad Night for Boxing,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 5, 1972.

<sup>56</sup> Interview between Louis Julian and Chris Marsh, May 19, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.



Figure 10: Native American and 1912 Olympic Champion Jim Thorpe meets with Willie and Melvin Nahanee of St. Paul's and William Matthias (in headdress) at the 1952 Buckskins Gloves. Source: *Vancouver Sun*, April 17, 1952

first tournament held at the St. Paul's gymnasium was so successful that year that Strain decided to make it an annual event. Squamish chief and activist Andy Paull – who Strain appeared to have a working relationship throughout the 1950s – suggested the name of the tournament be the “Buckskin Gloves.”<sup>58</sup> It was not simply a boxing show but a venue to celebrate native achievements, culture, and athletics. Strain

preferred to refer to it as a variety show which was meant to draw an audience as to raise money (likely for club expenses as Ray Silver stated in our interview it was a constant challenge to secure funds<sup>59</sup>). In 1952, Strain sought out Native American Olympic great Jim Thorpe (see Figure 10) in hopes that he would draw crowds. The show also featured gymnastics and tumbling by the St. Paul's school team, performances by Indian orchestras from the Mission and Burrard Reserve, singing by “Indian Princess” Ina Joseph, an autograph session with the greats of the 1936 North Shore Braves lacrosse team, and exhibitions of native dancing by local troupes.<sup>60</sup> Thorpe's ferry was escorted to North Vancouver by a war canoe manned by eleven Squamish paddlers in colorful regalia.<sup>61</sup> Of course, boxing was still a significant – not to mention exciting with its hard-hitting action! (see Figure 11) – part of the show that began on a Friday

<sup>58</sup> Louis, “B.C. Indians Top Boxers.”

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Ray Silver.

<sup>60</sup> “Greatest Indian Since Hiawatha Coming Here,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 12, 1952; “Two Mayors to Greet Thorpe,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 14, 1952.

<sup>61</sup> “War Canoe, 8 Tugs, Escort Jim Thorpe,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 17, 1952.



evening and went all day Saturday. This included special exhibition bouts such as the “Dos-And-Don’ts match,” where two boxers would demonstrate ideal technique and conduct. One fighter would exhibit footwork, agility, and precision punching while the other would fight dirty with attempted kicks, headbutts, and low blows.



*Figure 11: Norm Joseph of St. Paul's sports a bloody nose given to him by Oregon's Benny Capps at a Buckskin Gloves amateur match in 1952. A blood-spattered referee looks on. Source: Vancouver Sun, April 19, 1952*

Alan was proud that he was often sent out in front of crowds to demonstrate how to box the right way.<sup>62</sup>

The 1952 Buckskin Gloves was not as financially successful as Strain hoped it would be, mostly because of the \$1700 dollars it had paid to Thorpe as an appearance fee.<sup>63</sup> White fans did not come in numbers that Strain had expected, with crowds in Vancouver reaching 1,000 on Friday night and 1,400 on Saturday night, for what the newspapers dubbed a thrilling show and fine example of boxing.<sup>64</sup> Strain continued his strategy for the Buckskin Gloves when he brought it to Chilliwack in 1954, as the show was sometimes hosted by other municipalities in the valley. On these occasions, the Friday night qualifying matches would be held at one locale with the semi-final and final bouts being held at another the next night. The show held in Chilliwack featured much of the same as 1952 – except Strain did not shell out cash for a

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.

<sup>63</sup> “Greatest Indian Since Hiawatha Coming Here,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 12, 1952; “Buckskin Gloves \$791 in Red,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 25, 1951.

<sup>64</sup> “Braves Put up Fine fight But May Still Lose Scalps,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 19, 1952; “Braves Lose Bucks: Indians Thrill Fans,” *Vancouver Sun*, April 21, 1952.

celebrity to act as an attraction – and featured the organizer himself performing an acrobatic routine with his young daughter, Carolyn, which thrilled the crowd. The boxers and other performers drew a 700-person capacity crowd at the Ag Center that year.<sup>65</sup> A few years later, Strain proved that such shows were viable in Vancouver when the finals of the 1957 Buckskin Gloves – featuring hard-hitting Eddie Campbell of Totem AC – attracted a near-capacity crowd of 2,700.<sup>66</sup>

From 1949 until the late-1960s, the Buckskin Gloves was held every year in much the same format as other annual amateur boxing tournaments. Fighters would compete to top their weight class, a Buckskin Boy was crowned, and a host of special awards were handed out. For unknown reasons, the tournament went defunct for a few years until 1973, when it experienced a resurgence. In 1977, the MSA Boxing Club, with Ray Silver Sr. at the helm and Chester Douglas as coach, brought the Buckskin Gloves back to Chilliwack. The event attracted 60 boxers from all over B.C. - including Nelson and Prince George – as well as Lummi, Washington and as far away as Idaho. A huge difference between these new shows and the ones operated under Alex Strain was the greater focus on just boxing. Although the MSA-operated show featured native dancers in full regalia at intermission (see Figure 12), gone were tumblers, gymnasts, bands, and singers.<sup>67</sup> It is not known when the Buckskin Gloves faded away completely but the *Progress* stopped reporting on them in 1981. Their departure in the early-

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<sup>65</sup> "Buckskin Gloves a roaring, Punching Show," *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 29, 1954.

<sup>66</sup> "Buckskin Boy: Title Belongs to Campbell," *Vancouver Sun*, February 11, 1957.

<sup>67</sup> "Boxing Tourney for April 9-10," *The Chilliwack Progress*, March 30, 1977; "Buckskin Tourney Hosts 60 Boxers," *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 13, 1977.

1970s and the 1980s robbed native youth of a venue that previous generations had used as a means to generate self-confidence and pride through exclusive Aboriginal athletic competition.

However, the Stó:lō and other First Nations also lost a means to come together as broader community, to socialize and renew relationships. From the *Vancouver Sun's* reporting of the 1952 tournament, there was a lot of disappointment that the white community had failed to show up in a significantly way, indicating that majority of the crowd were First Nations people. Alan Campbell remarked that boxing brought him and his father closer together, as the sport provided a venue for his father to visit and see him perform.<sup>68</sup> A common theme that residential school survivors – of which Alan is one – is the intense loneliness that many of them felt from being isolated from family and other relatives, as the schools discouraged visitations.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps boxing shows like the Buckskin Gloves gave parents and other relatives a reason to visit their children – who participated as gymnasts, boxers, musicians, and beauty pageant



Figure 12: A dancer in regalia performs during Saturday night intermission at the Buckskin Gloves tournament in 1977, which was hosted by the MSA Boxing Club. Source: *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 13, 1977

contestants – in a manner that school officials had little control over or was seen as a more tolerable reason to do so. Of course, by the 1970s and with many residential schools having closed their doors, this was probably no longer necessary. Alan

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.

<sup>69</sup> Both J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) and the TRC Executive Summary, "Honouring the Truth" illustrate this student experience aptly.

Campbell definitely sees the Buckskin Gloves as something that was good for Aboriginal communities. In our interview he stated, “It was fun. The Buckskin Gloves was really a lot of fun because you could meet natives from all over the Fraser Valley and everything, I mean, they were from all over...The Buckskin Gloves was good. It brought our people together, I mean, from all over even though we didn’t like each other. I mean, because we are against you and you’re in a boxing club and my boxing club [are going to have to meet in competition]...We had good times.”<sup>70</sup> What Alan may have been getting at was the unifying and fracturing power that boxing as a sport may have had on First Nations communities. The Buckskin Gloves brought communities together and encouraged them to identify more broadly as Aboriginal people, united by competition because they were only open to native athletes. There would also be displays of native culture such singing, dancing, and drumming, activities that suggested an identity different from the Euro-Canadian community. Conversely, the desire to win and garner accolades for their local boxing clubs encouraged identification with the local community. Keith Carson has argued that in the early colonial period in B.C., the Canadian government attempted to fracture a greater Coast Salish group identity by imposing the reserve system on Aboriginal communities as to isolate them from each other and keep them politically weak. However, changes wrought by other colonial forces, such as the imposition of Christianity and the rise of new economies inadvertently offered opportunities for community gatherings (such as annual hops harvests and Christian Passion Plays), that nurtured supratribal identity.<sup>71</sup> The Buckskin Gloves may have operated in a similar manner in the second half of the twentieth century,

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.

<sup>71</sup> See “Introduction” and “Conclusion” in Keith Carlson’s *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

when residential schools were still being used to try to break down First Nations' society and culture.

### **Money, Compliance, Survival, Good Health, and Notoriety: Why Boxers Boxed**

Discussing boxing with Alan Campbell, it is easy to tell that it is something that he takes immense pride in, judging by the animated way in which he tells his stories. In 1957, he was runner-up at the Golden Gloves in Nanaimo<sup>72</sup> and received the All-Around Best Boxer award at the Canadian Championships in Camrose, Alberta shortly after. He regrets that his coach, Alex Strain, would not let him represent B.C. at a 1962 Canadian Championship in Toronto – a decision that spurred his decision to retire at 20. He proudly declares that had he found another boxing club to take him in to continue his training, there was likely no featherweight in Canada that could have beat him. Alan enjoys talking about boxing, so it was shocking when he told me towards the end of our interview that if given the choice when he was child, he would have never started boxing in the first place. By age ten, he had already once resisted the efforts of his father, Sylvester Campbell, to get him into the sport. However, when he attended residential school at St. Paul's, he did not believe that he had a choice in the matter. He explained that while at the school he felt that he just had to obey instructions and boxing was just another compulsory activity. At the same time, he is grateful for the training that he received, believing that without it, he would have been bullied his whole life. Alan was born with three disadvantages that would have made him an inviting target for tormentors – he was small, Aboriginal, and had a hearing impairment. Alan maintains that although this latter

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<sup>72</sup> "Henn New Golden Boy at Nanaimo," *Vancouver Sun*, April 27, 1957.

disability mostly shielded him from having to hear slurs from racist white society, he was aware of racial tensions in North Vancouver, which he described as a “rough place.” He remembers an incident in which “white boys” pointed a sawed-off .22-calibre rifle at his brother and foster brother, as well as the presence of large native gangs who banded together for protection. Boxing granted to Alan an enormous confidence in himself and the means to stand up to those that picked on him, who he believed did so because of his size. Although he feels boxing was forced on him, he credits sports in general—including gymnastics, soccer, and softball—with giving him the strength to survive the residential school experience and to stave off a descent into drugs and alcohol, not taking his first “real” drink until he was eighteen (he remembers a logging relative giving him warmed rum as a remedy for a bad cough when he was a little younger). In our interview he declared, “It’s sports, sports, sports that lengthened my life.”<sup>73</sup> Alan took the mental and physical toughness bestowed by boxing to mitigate the negative impacts of colonial impositions, notably the residential school system and the despair that drove others to turn to drugs and alcohol.

In contrast to Alan, Chester sought out and enthusiastically participated in boxing of his own volition. Although Chester attended St. Mary’s residential school—which he says did have a boxing program—he never did any boxing there. A member of the Vedder Boxing Club when he was 11, the club shut its doors in 1962. At some point during a four year hiatus from the sport, Chester was, in his own words, a “delinquent” who was drinking a lot, getting into trouble, and sometimes ending up in jail on the weekend. This behavior may have been in response to the racist atmosphere that existed in Chilliwack, where he attended high school. Chester

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Alan Campbell.

maintains that it was only in Chilliwack where he encountered racial discrimination. At around 15 or 16, he moved to Langley to live with his sisters because of some troubles he was having at school. Additionally, it was at about this time Chester decided to get back into boxing. After seeing a Golden Gloves tournament, he said to himself that he “could beat all those guys” and resolved to do so. He joined the Langley Boxing Club and began training. Chester told me that he boxed for “sport, pride, and challenge” as well as for “notoriety.” He wanted everybody to know and respect him. He loved the feeling of being known for his accomplishments, fighting in front a crowd, and being cheered on by family and friends. After he began to achieve local fame, everyone wanted to be his friend where previously they had been antagonistic because of his First Nation ethnicity. With a sly smile, he also told me that getting in shape and the notoriety he got from boxing made it easier to meet girls. In seriousness, Chester declared that boxing had “straightened him out” by keeping him out of mischief and away from alcohol. Boxing required discipline to train 3-4 days a week and to do roadwork every day. To be successful, one could not be drinking or messing around with crime.<sup>74</sup> As with Alan, Chester used boxing to mitigate the negative impacts of colonial society, which included racial discrimination and the negative effects of alcohol on First Nation communities.

Ray Silver Sr. also spoke about the racial tensions that existed between Euro-Canadians and First Nations peoples when he spoke about boxing. Ray did a lot of his fighting outside the Stó:lō “golden era,” during the 1940s and 50s in hop yards, during communal berry picking, and at logging camps in the United States. Rays declares that he always boxed “for money, never for a trophy.” Ray also put his boxing skills to the test against town bullies that lurked in

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Chester Douglas.

Abbotsford. He recalled that the town was filled with lots of “prejudiced guys” who “thought they were better than native people.” Ray said he had his share of scraps with these guys and had the scars to prove it.<sup>75</sup> Ray’s only boxing trophy was in recognition of his seventeen years of service as coach and organzier, which was presented to him by former world champion Archie Moore at a Buckskin Gloves tournament at Chilliwack in April 1980.<sup>76</sup> When I asked Ray why it was important to teach kids how to box, he replied it was important for kids to learn how to protect themselves. Referring to the racist atmosphere of Abbotsford, he wanted Sumas children to not have to “take shit from anyone” by being able to defend themselves. It is evident that Ray also wanted to alleviate some of these racial tensions. Like most of the town clubs, Ray’s was an interethnic one. He had white and Aboriginal men who contributed their time and talents to instructing the boys of the club but he had no tolerance for those who were openly prejudicial. He quickly got rid of those who were. Ray recalled an incident where he learned from a concerned local school principal who had called him. One of the parents was offering his kids five dollars for “every white kid that they licked,” which they enthusiastically responded to while at school. Ray reacted by making it clear to his entire club that the skills they learned were not to be used to pick on others, a mantra that Ray emphasized was repeated often.<sup>77</sup> Boxing was also important for the boys because it built healthy bodies, instilled self-confidence, taught discipline and perseverance in the face of adversity, and steered them away from drugs and alcohol. Again, boxing was useful in alleviating the negative

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Ray Silver.

<sup>76</sup> “Ex-Champ Moore Visits Chilliwack,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 23, 1980; “Punchfest for Boxers,” *The Chilliwack Progress*, April 23, 1980; Interview with Ray Silver.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Ray Silver.



effects of colonialism: physical threats that stemmed from racial intolerance based on the disdain for First Nations people as second-class citizens and the mental anguish that it could cause, such as an inhibited sense of self-worth. Ray aimed to give indigenous youth the tools to combat both, by teaching them to defend themselves and by buttressing a sense of self-worth through sport.

### **Conclusion**

Scholars such as Philip Deloria and Janice Foster have illustrated that when wielded by colonial powers, sports participation and athletic competition have the potential to be a powerful tool in assimilating indigenous peoples. They are a means to disseminate the values of Western culture in a more pleasurable context, one that seems less overtly threatening and therefore less likely to inspire resistance. This incorporation of foreign values can work to undermine Aboriginal world views, leading to an overthrow of traditional economic models, political systems, and social customs, then ultimately eradicating the competing culture. At least, this is what colonizer in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century hoped would occur. It is unclear what the motivations were for men like Bruce Gleig and Alex Strain in opening up boxing clubs, encouraging the participation of Aboriginal youth, and organizing tournaments like the Buckskin Gloves. We simply have no good evidence – contained in archival records such as letters or dairies or oral histories – that would shed light on their reasons. What is clear from the testimony of members of the Stó:lō community is that even if sports were intended to be tool of assimilation meant to undermine indigenous cultures, their effects were ultimately paradoxical. Just as new economic activities such as hop yards cultivation and canneries facilitated community gatherings and identification with a supratribal entity, so too

did the Buckskin Gloves tournaments. They showcased a visible native culture by means of dances, songs, and drumming. Through the competition of children in sport, indigenous people could come together to renew relationships with each other. Boxing had the potential to grant indigenous children self-confidence, a means to resist the message of white society that “Indians” were inferior. It gave Aboriginal youth the tools to ward off the physical blows of whites who threw them, often motivated by racial intolerance and hatred. Finally, boxing gave communities a means to resist the scourge of alcohol and drugs. Although much more

investigation is required into this topic, as the balance sheet stands right now, boxing was a undoubtedly a positive force for the Stó:lō and other Fraser Valley indigenous communities .

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