

# Research Note: Defining “Aboriginal” in a Historical and Sporting Context

SARAH TREMBANIS<sup>†</sup>

*Department of History and Politics  
Immaculata University*

AS I PREPARED MY DISSERTATION for defense in the summer of 2006, I became increasingly aware of a number of provocative (and unanswered) questions regarding aboriginal racial identity. In my dissertation on African Americans and baseball, I only addressed issues of aboriginal identity obliquely. Yet, even as I inched towards completion and particularly now as I contemplate these issues post-dissertation, I have begun to realize the significance of aboriginal athletes in the broader story that I hope to tell. Because of the U.S. racial climate in the first half of the twentieth century, it is imperative that I explore how aboriginals constructed their racial identities and how others (both whites and African Americans) framed the categorization of “aboriginal athletes.” Within my dissertation, I examined the ways that African Americans, through a variety of baseball-themed cultural forms such as folklore, advertisements, and cartoons, challenged the idea of a monolithic African-American identity. Quite significantly, many of the authors, artists, and baseball players who provided these critiques referenced the liminal identities of aboriginal athletes.<sup>1</sup> At this very early stage of contemplating how to expand my research to include more fully the multitude of aboriginal sporting identities, I have found some of my earlier research on Virginia eugenics to be especially useful. For non-white athletes

<sup>†</sup>Correspondence to [strembanis@immaculata.edu](mailto:strembanis@immaculata.edu).

performing and living in the early twentieth century, eugenic ideology manifested itself in legislation that denied any racial identification existing outside a quantifiable scientific determination. In the nexus between segregated sport and eugenics, I have encountered preliminary answers and a number of significant questions.<sup>2</sup>

In 1924, W.A. Plecker, the State Registrar of Vital Statistics, warned his fellow white Virginians of a great danger facing the state. According to Plecker, there no longer existed any true "American Indians" in Virginia; they had been replaced by racially-mixed persons who claimed an aboriginal classification to gain the privileges of white society. As evidence, Plecker submitted the testimony of various white Virginians, who concluded that "there is not today an Indian in Virginia unmixed with negro blood." Thus, Plecker editorialized, "[T]heir light color makes them much more dangerous to the white race than when darker." Plecker continued by linking these "near-white" Indians to an alleged plot by unnamed northern interests to reclassify "3,000 . . . organized mulattoes" as Indians. Under such a classification, Plecker warned, these Virginians would have the legal right to attend white public schools and have access to business and institutions that barred African Americans. Most significantly, from Plecker's standpoint, such people might be able to marry a white person.<sup>3</sup>

Plecker was part of a larger cadre of bureaucrats, scientists, politicians, and avowed white supremacists who attempted to strip people of their aboriginal status in the 1910s and 1920s. For these American eugenicists, aboriginal people posed a significant threat to the formation of a pure white race.<sup>4</sup> Attempts to diagnose aboriginal identity through the straightness of their hair or complexion of their skin were judged by state officials to be insufficiently accurate in determining race in accordance with governmental standards. Consequently, contemporary eugenicists struggled to establish foolproof tests for "true" aboriginal identity. Occupying a space that eugenicists could not recognize as truly white, yet could also not consider as "Negroid," aboriginals existed in a liminal space within the racial boundaries of American society.

Under the auspices of Virginia's 1924 Racial Integrity Act, people of non-white descent were forbidden from marrying a white person. State legislators insisted on one exception to the anti-miscegenation law. Virginians who could document that they possessed one-sixteenth of aboriginal blood were to be classified as white and given all the attendant privileges of such status. This clause was known as the "Pocahontas exception" and was designed to exempt members of Virginia's upper-class society who claimed to be descendants of the marriage of John Rolfe and Pocahontas.

The architects and promoters of the Racial Integrity Act fervently trusted that eugenic research would bolster their administration of the law. As such, they believed that modern science and meticulous record-keeping could safeguard racial purity and definitively allow for the assignment of racial classifications such as aboriginal. Thus, the Racial Integrity Act also stipulated that all birth certificates had to denote accurately a child's racial classification. If eugenicists could establish such racial classifications then they could successfully prosecute people who violated anti-miscegenation laws and segregation policies. Yet, even as Virginia eugenicists tasted success both in the passage of the Racial Integrity Act and the Supreme Court's favorable decision on the constitutionality of the state's eugenic sterilization law, *Buck v. Bell* (1927), they struggled with how to racially

classify the generations of citizens whose births predated the Racial Integrity Act.<sup>5</sup>

For historians interested in issues of aboriginal identity in the world of sport, the case of pre-World War II Virginia supplies a much-needed historical context and inspires provocative questions. American aboriginal athletes competed in sports that were largely regulated in terms of racial binarism. White professional baseball officials, for example, drew a color line that permitted whites to compete, while prohibiting African Americans from participating. This unwritten and impenetrable binary color-line was ambiguous in regards to aboriginal players.<sup>6</sup> This liminality could be a double-edged sword. For some aboriginal athletes, their appearance was sufficiently white (or at least not-black) to allow them entrance into the (all) white world of professional American sports. Similarly, Plecker's own records show that members of Virginia's aboriginal population claimed "whiteness" for themselves and for their children, thus ensuring their children would have access to public schools.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, other aboriginals were denied not only the privileges of whiteness but also of status within the federally-designated category of "American Indian." Because of their physical features, geographical location, local folk tradition, and Plecker's administration of the 1924 Racial Integrity Act, these aboriginal people were re-raced and classified as African American. As such, they were subject to the strictures of Jim Crow.<sup>8</sup>

Both outcomes were problematic for aboriginal people. Moreover, both re-classifications disregarded separate and distinct aboriginal identities. For Plecker and other eugenicists who saw American society as a division between white and black, there was little room for aboriginals. According to the Racial Integrity Act, the only sanctioned marriage between whites and aboriginals had occurred three hundred years earlier, between a white man (Rolfe) and an aboriginal woman (Pocahontas). The descendants who sprang from that line had subsequently renounced their ties to aboriginal communities and assimilated as purely white. This reification of white Virginians' ties to a specific (and romanticized) moment of contact with aboriginal society inherently denied the historical and cultural experiences of all other aboriginal groups within the state. Moreover, eugenic case studies like *Mongrel Virginians* explicitly advanced the racist theory that American aboriginals were "near-white" and, because of their lack of purity, unfit.

Aboriginal athletes operated within this difficult racial nexus. As David Wallace Adams and John Bloom have demonstrated in their examinations of football at aboriginal boarding schools in the United States, sportswriters and fans who attended football games between aboriginal and college teams understood the aboriginal players to be representative of the larger American aboriginal culture (a homogenous culture to many white observers).<sup>9</sup> Confronted with a boarding school system designed to assimilate them and state eugenics policies constructed to deny their existence, aboriginal athletes functioned as visible challenges to both. Moreover, the widespread preoccupation with tying racially-typed blood percentages to aboriginal identity diminished the ability of aboriginal athletes (and black athletes with aboriginal ancestors) to connect publicly with their diverse backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

Historians of sport need to consider how individual athletes negotiated aboriginal identity. Did some athletes have a fluid conception of being aboriginal, or did they insist upon a cultural recognition of their background? In his study of an aboriginal boarding

school, Bloom has suggested that aboriginal athletes, beginning in the 1930s, understood sport as a means by which they could advance their notions of racial (aboriginal and tribe-specific) pride.<sup>11</sup> What, though, was the experience of aboriginal athletes outside of the boarding school system? Moreover, sport historians interested in the experience of African Americans need to consider if (and how) black athletes seized upon the liminal identity of Native Americans to define their own racial classification and critique Jim Crow segregation. On a larger scale, how did specific aboriginal athletes and communities respond to eugenics and athletic segregation? Did certain aboriginal groups develop communal strategies for how to negotiate their identity and societal status? If so, how did those strategies and identities change at specific moments in history? Interrogating the experiences of Virginian aboriginal athletes in the 1920s at the height of the state eugenics movement might reveal a great deal about their strategies of resistance and accommodation during times of great vulnerability. For historians of non-American aboriginal athletes and sport, how did the specific racial politics of their geographic location influence the construction of an aboriginal identity? Finally, how has this notion of blood and racial identity evolved throughout the history of sport? How aboriginal must one be, to be considered truly aboriginal?<sup>12</sup> Answering these questions will both better inform an understanding of historical experience and also precipitate a more nuanced analysis of the ways that socially-constructed racial categories influence contemporary (and post-segregation) aboriginal sporting experiences. By interrogating how aboriginal athletes defined their own racial and ethnic identities—and how others, including sports organizers, defined it for them—one can better problematize how aboriginal identities were and are historically constructed, avoiding any inclination to view aboriginal or other racial identities in a monolithic manner.



<sup>1</sup>One of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon is the Charlie Grant/Chief Tokohama story. An oft-repeated story alleged that John McGraw of the New York Giants attempted to sign an African-American ballplayer by the name of Charlie Grant in 1901. In order to circumvent the unstated segregation rule of white professional baseball, McGraw transformed Grant into a Cherokee Indian and renamed him “Chief Tokohama.” Depending on the version of the story, either other players alerted White Sox owner Charles Comiskey (who then refused to play against the Giants until Grant was removed from the team) or African-American fans greeted Giants with such fanfare that his cover was blown. See Mark Ribowsky, *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadows of Baseball* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 51. The second version of Grant's unmasking can be found in Ted Shane, “The Chocolate Rube Waddell,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 27 July 1940, pp. 80-81. For an analysis of the tale within the context of African-American baseball trickster tales, see Sarah Trembanis, “They Opened the Door Too Late: African Americans and Baseball, 1900-1947” (Ph.D. dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 2006), 220-222.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Dyreson and Patrick Miller have ably documented the intersections of scientific racism and sport. For representative works, see Dyreson, “American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1950: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism?” *Journal of Sport History* 28 (2001): 173-215; and Miller, “The Anatomy of Scientific Racism: Racist Responses to Black Athletic Achievement,” *Journal of Sport History* 25 (1998): 119-151.

<sup>3</sup>W.A. Plecker, Virginia Bureau of Vital Statistics, *Eugenics in Relation to the New Family and the Law on Racial Integrity, including a Paper Read before the American Public Health Association* (Richmond, Va.: D. Bottom, Superintendent Public Printing, 1924), 28-29. Plecker's argument was extended by Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan E. McDougale in their book, *Mongrel Virginians*. Estabrook and McDougale

dubbed an aboriginal community in Virginia the Win Tribe. Win stood for White-Indian-Negro and reflected the authors' assertion that Virginia's aboriginal people were racially mixed and thus eugenically unfit. Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan E. McDougle, *Mongrel Virginians: The Win Tribe* (Baltimore, Md.: The Williams and Wilkins Company, 1926).

<sup>4</sup>There is a growing literature on the American eugenics movement. The key work remains Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). See also Adele C. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and the Problems of Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Edward J. Larson, *Sex, Race, and Science: Eugenics in the Deep South* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). On eugenics in Virginia, see Gregory M. Dorr, "Assuring America's Place in the Sun: Ivey Foreman Lewis and the Teaching of Eugenics at the University of Virginia, 1915-1953," *Journal of Southern History* 66 (2000): 257-296; Lisa Lindquist Dorr, "Arm in Arm: Gender, Eugenics, and Virginia's Racial Integrity Acts of the 1920s," *Journal of Women's History* 11 (1999): 143-166; and Richard Sherman, "'The Last Stand': The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History* 54 (1988): 69-92. David J. Smith explicitly addresses the plight of Virginia's aboriginal population in *The Eugenic Assault on America: Scenes in Red, White, and Black* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup>Estabrook, McDougle, and Plecker all mentioned the difficulties they frequently had in determining an individual's race. They focused on hair (straight hair indicating whiteness in some instances) and skin color. See Ivan McDougle and Gwendolyn Watson, "Interview on race mixing for *Mongrel Virginians*," 24 April 1924, Eugenics Archive, <<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org>> [6 September 2006]; letter, W.A. Plecker to John Powell, 30 July 1924, John Powell Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia; letter, W.A. Plecker to Harry E. Davis, 4 October 1924, Powell Papers; letter, W.A. Plecker to *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 28 April 1925.

<sup>6</sup>According to various legendary tales, John McGraw of the New York Giants tried on numerous occasions to take advantage of this loophole. McGraw allegedly asked a number of African-American players to assume an aboriginal identity in order to gain entrance to the white major leagues. Charles C. Alexander, *John McGraw* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Mark Ribowsky, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884-1955* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>7</sup>Letter, W.A. Plecker to John Powell, 30 July 1924, Powell Papers; letter, W.A. Plecker to Harry E. Davis, 4 October 1924, Powell Papers; letter, W.A. Plecker to *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 28 April 1925. Plecker's definition of "negro" was so all-encompassing that it is difficult to determine whether some of the women he attacked for registering children as "white" had aboriginal descendants. Plecker continually attempted to class all Virginians as either white or black. His letter to Mrs. Robert Cheatham was typical. In it, he disputed her claim that she and her husband were white and noted that the Racial Integrity Act said that "if a child has one drop of negro blood . . . it cannot be counted as white." He then continued on to warn the mother to keep her child from "mix[ing] with white children. It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia. It is an awful thing." Letter, W.A. Plecker to Mrs. Robert H. Cheatham, 30 April 1924, Powell Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, *The Eugenic Assault on America*.

<sup>9</sup>David Wallace Adam, "More Than a Game: The Carlisle Indians Take to the Gridiron, 1893-1917," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (2001): 25-53; John Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). See also Raymond Schmidt, "Lords of the Prairie: Haskell Indian School Football, 1919-1930," *Journal of Sport History* 28 (2001): 403-426.

<sup>10</sup>On the historical and contemporary conflict of aboriginals contemplating an identity that is often determined by blood percentages (by both the United States government and sovereign tribal governments), see Pauline Turner Strong and Barrick Van Winkle, "'Indian Blood': Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity," *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996): 547-576.

<sup>11</sup>Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do*, 51-76.

<sup>12</sup>See Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).