

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

HISTORY OF MEDALS

Medals in sport are given as a symbol of achievement. Circular medals can be seen throughout history within many cultures across the globe. The history of medals also has origins in gifts for military and political service, gifts given to important people, and as a token of allyship. Throughout the history of sports competitions, medals coincide with the celebration of greatness during sporting ceremonies. Medals or coins were also given by representatives of the Crown to many First Nations groups who entered into treaties. The circular design of a medal shares similar aesthetic qualities with medallions created by Indigenous Peoples throughout history and present times.

SYMBOLISM OF MEDALLIONS

Medallions, objects and embellishments on art, clothing, and jewelry were, and continue to be, done with materials such as beads, quills, moose and elk tufts, shells, wool, paint, antlers, copper, and carved wood. The designs include patterns and symbols that reflect a variety of meanings. Oral traditions of passing on stories, values, kinship, spirituality, natural world connections and beliefs are reflected in art, clothing, and regalia. Circular objects used to spin wool “were often carved with intricate designs using icons with personal or family meaning....”¹

To create and give a gift of a medallion reflects values of honour, respect, and relationship building. The process involved in beading, tufting, quilling, painting and carving can be healing for many Indigenous Peoples and connects to culture, spirit, and land. The continuation of these practices is a form of resistance, resilience, and flourishing. At one time in history, cultural items and practices such as the Potlatch and Sundance were legally banned through the Indian Act. Ceremonial practices and cultural artefacts were often deemed sacrilegious. Many ceremonial leaders ended up imprisoned while cultural items ended up in museums, family homes of those who confiscated the items, or resold for large volumes of money. Many cultural items still need to be repatriated today.

¹ Northwest Territorial Mint. (n.d.). *Thunderbird Spindle Whorl*. Retrieved from NWTM Store: https://store.nwtmint.com/product_details/2308/Thunderbird_Spindle_Whorl/index.html

MEDAL/MEDALLION as RELATIONSHIP

When a medal or medallion is given, it activates a relationship between the giver and receiver. The two parties exchange words through the air we share and breathe creating an interconnection to each other. In relationships, we share breaths when we converse with one another. It is in the conversations we have, the truths and stories we share that bring us closer together.² Athletes are mindful of the deep breaths of air they need to rhythmically take in order to fully empower their body, mind, and spirit when competing in sports. Even though the Indigenous Hall of Famers come from different places across this vast land, the air they breathe and the stories they share continue to connect them to each other and to us.

SIGNIFICANCE OF A CIRCLE

The circle, as represented by medallions, is a symbol of [interconnectivity](#) and [holistic wellness](#) of the self, family, community, and society within many Indigenous cultural ways. The circle is reflected in the natural world and represents balance, relationship, wholeness, unity, and life cycles. When we sit or stand together in a circle, we are engaging in a mutually respectful relationship with each other where each person is valued. Commonly when ceremonies, feasts, and celebrations occur it is done so in a circle:

The pipe ceremony, for example, follows the sun's path in a circle. Stories are often told to a circle of listeners and various meetings and decision-making institutions are conducted with a circle of participants...Each time that the sun rises in the east to circle across the sky, the day moves through four parts: morning, afternoon, evening, and night. The days join together to bring four seasons. The concept of four directions is sometimes represented by the idea of four winds that blow from the north, south, east, and west. Many dances incorporate the four directions, which symbolize different things to different Nations. In one interpretation, the east represents the sun and fire; the south, the thunderbird and water; the west, plants, animals, and earth; and the north, wind and air. Some First Nations also identify four sacred elements of creation: earth, water, air, and fire.³

The drum is a circle and plays an important role in bringing people together and in ceremonies. The heartbeat is like the rhythm of the drum. The first drum song you ever hear or feel is that of your mother's heart beat when you are growing inside her.

² Wisselink, K. (2019, February 14). *An Indigenous Pedagogy for Decolonization*. Retrieved from AU Press: <https://www.aupress.ca/blog/2019/02/14/decolonization/>

³ Government of Alberta. (n.d.). *Well-being: Cycles of Life - Excerpt from Aboriginal Perspectives*. Retrieved from Walking Together: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum: https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/well_being/documents/cycles_of_life.pdf

The heart beat is powered by the rhythmical nature of our breathing. When you are active, your heart beats to the rhythm of your overall level of health. When you are active, you are running to the beat of your own drum song, while your feet connect with the earth and your breath connects with the clean air that trees and plants provide for us. Drumming and singing within Indigenous circles have been passed down for generations and have several purposes. Traditionally, Mohawk men create a song to sing to their newborn baby, which the child carries through their life.⁴ Songs provide self-regulation, attachment, empowerment, teachings, and spiritual connections. Drum and song continue to play a key role in traditional sports and games for example the drum is an integral part of traditional Dene hand games which are played at the Arctic Winter Games. Shared breath as one inhales and exhales the sounds of traditional songs are apparent in many examples of Indigenous everyday and ceremonial life.

KINSHIP CIRCLES

Original Indigenous child-rearing practices place the child at the centre, with nurturing supports circling the child. Supports that surround the child within a community will help nurture the child's growth and lifelong wellness. Distinct Nations have original child-rearing teachings that are unique and essential to them. Everything done was with and for children who learned from kinship systems that included immediate and extended family. Children were educated about life by being completely integrated and immersed into process and practices on the land they lived on.⁵ Strong kinship systems create positive self-awareness, attachment, dignity, and belonging.⁶ "Families are extensive networks of strong, connective kinship; they are often entire communities."⁷ Learning more in depth about original child-rearing practices can be done by creating and maintaining relationships with Indigenous communities, which include traditional Knowledge Holder. [Interconnection](#) is a core way of knowing and being that some describe as the circle of life.

⁴ Health Nexus. (2019). *Taking Care of Our Children - Facilitator Guide: Parent Workshop on Childrearing in First Nations Families and Communities*. Retrieved from Best Start: Resources:

<https://resources.beststart.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/K67-A.pdf>

⁵ Indigenous Motherhood. (16, March 2020). *Traditional Indigenous Kinship Practices at Home: Being Child-Centered During the Pandemic*. Retrieved from Indigenous Motherhood:

<https://indigenoumotherhood.wordpress.com/2020/03/16/traditional-indigenous-kinship-practices-at-home-being-child-centered-during-the-pandemic/>

⁶ Talaga, T. (2018). *All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward (The CBC Massey Lectures)*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

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Traditional kinship bonds and transference of knowledge were forcibly severed through colonization tactics. When children were forced to attend Residential Schools, communication and attachment bonds were diminished between child and family through violent assimilation methods such as physical, emotional, spiritual and mental punishment for simply speaking original languages. A child uttering words or phrases in their first language, like “hello” or “I love you,” would have seen violent consequences in these institutions. Laws, policies, and attitudes forced upon Indigenous Peoples attempted to destroy kinship systems rooted in love of each other, the natural world, and the Creator.

CIRCLE OF RELATIONSHIPS

The circle of relationships and interconnectivity extends beyond immediate family and community, and connects with larger social groups and society as a whole. Relationships between Indigenous groups existed pre-colonization and continue to form. Treaty relationships between Indigenous groups occurred long before treaty relationships with the Crown.

The circular [treaty coin](#) has a depth of symbolism that goes beyond the aesthetics of the medal much like that of sports medals, beaded and carved medallions. The gifting of treaty medals was symbolic of shared promises and working together. The visual symbolism on the circular treaty coin gives the impression that both parties are on equal ground and entering a relationship that was supposed to be built on mutual respect.

The spirit and intent of treaties were understood as sacred agreements between two groups and the Creator, yet treaties as understood by the original inhabitants of this land continue to be unfilled. A false sense of trust was built only as a colonization tactic to secure violent control over the land and way of life of Indigenous Peoples. Whether or not a Nation entered into a Treaty with the Crown, all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples have had relationships with settlers, and typically that relationship was based on the newcomers’ paternalistic and Eurocentric values.

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS

Developing and maintaining relationships with each other in a good way is central to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. When standing in a circle together and greeting each other in a positive way, we are making an initial connection with one another. Saying hello to one another is commonplace, yet when we place ourselves in a circle while learning an Indigenous language, we can begin to make deeper connections and acknowledge languages and cultures that were once forcibly severed due to aggressive assimilation tactics. This is also a small step for newcomers and settlers towards supporting reconciliation and becoming a good ally.

Connecting with each other in the circle is one small entry point into beginning to understand and acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing and being connected to relationships with each other. In the circle, everyone is valued, supported, and interconnected. "All my relations" is an English phrase some Indigenous Peoples may use to reflect the connection we have to each other as well as the natural world.

SPORT

Every sport represented by the Indigenous Hall of Famers connects back to the air; one reason for this is because the air we all breathe sustains our bodies. Whether playing a team sport, or solo sport, relationships are essential. Teams become like family thus become a part of the larger kinship circle in which team members, coaches and mentors work together at building relationships. The strengths of each team member is celebrated while mentors and coaches offer circles of support to individuals and teams much like that of the concept of [interconnection](#) within [Indigenous circle pedagogy](#). When competing with teams, sportsmanship amongst those we compete with is central to maintain the integrity of sports. In sport, we shake hands with each other as a symbol of respect. Teams in sport connect back to the idea of relationships since a team becomes like family, thus creating extended kinship bonds.

Building positive relationships and promoting sportsmanship, even amongst rival teams, can be uplifting rather than leaving individuals, teams, and fans feeling deflated and bitter. Several Indigenous Hall of Famers experienced racism on and off the field, yet with self-determination, athletic drive, and support from their families and others, they were able to flourish. Indigenous Peoples in mainstream sports continue to battle against racist slurs, which can demean one's sense of self-worth. In her [#WeWillDoBetter](#) vignette, Hall of Famer Waneek Horn-Miller has said:

... I do experience racism, and I do fear it, and I fear for my children and I fear because the shootings are still happening, the issues are still happening, it's still happening, but I think we are talking about it and there is movement to do something about it. That is the only way we are going to find solutions. It's not my community or your community; it's our community and we're going to have to find it together. Our children are in great, great need for that because their future is at stake and I would never ever, ever want them to go through something like the Oka Crisis, that is my greatest nightmare, but it's always a potential unless we do something.

Dismantling racism through education and action while instilling resilience in those who bear the burden of hateful action can help society flourish together, both on and off the sports field.