

By **KELLY BOUCHARD**

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With Tom Longboat Day in Ontario fast approaching, we have an opportunity to revisit the story of the most famous Indigenous athlete in Canadian sports history.

Known in his native Onondaga as Cogwagee, the man from Six Nations of the Grand River reserve in Southern Ontario took the running world by storm in the early 1900s, winning the Boston Marathon in 1907 and holding the world's professional marathon championship title in 1908 and 1909.

Since his death in 1949, Longboat has been memorialized through athletic awards, statues, stamps, movies, books, and, since 2010, an official provincial day every June 4th.

Recent news and sports articles laud him as well. They typically tell the story of a man who reached the top of his sport in an unabashedly racist environment where few Indigenous athletes were able to rise. A 2017 article on cbc.ca, for instance, declared him “ahead of his time” a notion prevalent among most people familiar with his story today.

This representation, though, is untrue, and despite good intentions obscures and deadens Longboat's legacy as much as honours it. Longboat was definitively of his time, not ahead of it. Having fled residential school as a child, withstood bigoted press coverage throughout his career, and resisted attempts by white managers to control him, he certainly overcame fearsome obstacles on his road to success. But he was far from the only Indigenous Canadian runner of his era to do so.

Newspapers of the time frequently mention others. William Davis of Six Nations placed a “world class” second in the 1901 Boston race, years before Longboat's victory. Ojibway Fred Simpson was sixth in the 1908 Olympic marathon, which Longboat failed to finish, and Paul Acoose of Saulteaux First Nation in Saskatchewan beat Longboat in 1910 at an event billed “The Redskin Running Championship of the World.” Meanwhile, Albert Smoke, another Ojibway, raced throughout North America in the 1910s before competing at the 1920 Olympics and placing third in Boston.

These and many others were heroes in their time, but today Longboat is depicted as the lone star in an otherwise dark history, thus consigning his contemporaries to obscurity and hiding the fact that far more elite Indigenous runners were competing in Canada in the early 1900s than today. Far, far more according to a spokesman for Athletics Canada, who says just one Indigenous runner has raced on a Canadian national team in recent memory, and that was in 2013.

Yet Janice Forsyth, former director of Western University's International Centre of Olympic Studies, co-editor of the book *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada*, and member of Fisher River Cree First Nation in Manitoba, maintains the mischaracterization of Longboat's era is just one problem with how his story has been told. His legend has also been perpetuated through the Tom Longboat Awards, which began as a clear instance of cultural appropriation.

Today, presented annually to outstanding Indigenous athletes by Canada's Aboriginal Sport Circle, the awards were instituted in 1951 by the Department of Indian Affairs and the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada and used in the '50s and '60s as what Forsyth terms "tools for assimilation."

Herself a former award winner, Forsyth says her research indicates the awards were meant to encourage Indigenous participation in Euro-Canadian sports, and flag residential school athletes as shining examples of "assimilated Indians."

Faced with this history, we need to deeply consider how we talk about Longboat today. We might start by returning him to the company of his peers, portraying him accurately as an Indigenous athlete among Indigenous athletes. We might also remember that Longboat is not only an Indigenous hero, but a hero of the Six Nations people. They have a right to determine how his story is told.

Cindy Martin, Longboat's great, great, great niece, who helped start Six Nations reserve's annual Tom Longboat Run, thinks everyone should celebrate Longboat, but emphasizes he was more than just a runner.

"He spoke his language," she says. "He followed the Longhouse religion. He didn't assimilate." She suggests Longboat, a humble man, wouldn't have felt diminished by the recognition of his contemporaries. Regarding the Longboat awards' assimilative history, she says: "My family has let our elected Chief Ava Hill know that we want the award to be revitalized and administered by Six Nations."

She wants, in other words, the return of something taken without permission. In that spirit, we can at least acknowledge and correct the misrepresentations that have marked Longboat's legacy instead of continuing to reproduce them.

Kelly Bouchard is Toronto-based writer whose current work centres on the history of Indigenous athletes in Canada.

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