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# Covid-19 in Indigenous Communities

## Five Protective Factors of “Exercising” Sovereignty

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### Abstract

Indigenous Peoples have an inherent responsibility and right to “exercising” sovereignty - the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of our cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship (Ali-Joseph 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to and equity (inequity) in sport and physical activity has been felt (physically, spiritually, politically) within Indigenous communities. We implement an abundance-based Indigenous approach to understanding Indigenous Peoples’ responses to the coronavirus pandemic through sport and its far-reaching ramifications in Indian Country. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen Indigenous Peoples utilize social media such as Facebook and TikTok to reimagine Indigenous sport in digital spaces such as the “Social Distance Powwow” and “Pass the RezBall Challenge”. Utilizing Indigenous ways of knowing, practices of survivance, Indigenous sport scholarship, and Indigenous responses to COVID-19 we describe five protective factors of “exercising” sovereignty that have emerged including community, relationality, strength, abundance, and resilience.

Keywords: Indigenous sport, exercise sovereignty, COVID-19, Indigenous Peoples, Indian Country

### Introduction

Indigenous Peoples have been disproportionately impacted by the novel coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19). In May 2020, the Navajo Nation surpassed Covid-19 epicenters, New York and New Jersey, with the highest per capita rates of virus infection (Indian Country Today, 2020). As three Indigenous women currently living across Turtle Island (North America), from different Indigenous nations (Shinnecock Nation, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma), we have been empowered by sport and witnessed its impact across Indian Country throughout our lives. As Covid-19 altered our personal and professional lives, we noted its impact on Indigenous communities.

The Covid-19 pandemic does not only affect physical health, but trickles into the very fabric of Indigenous

communities. As sovereign nations, our economies, as well as our cultural responsibilities and ceremonies have been altered. History has shown us that when Indigenous Peoples are faced with world crises such as famine, war, climate change, and disease, sports emerge, responding to challenging times in an abundance of innovation (Oxendine, 1988). As such, the evolution of Indigenous sport should not be separated from community resilience as sport is integral to instilling Indigenous values, knowledge, and community connectedness necessary for Indigenous nations to survive endemic hardships, including pandemics.

For many Indigenous Peoples living on Indigenous territories, reserves, or reservations, sport is an essential activity, a necessary way for communities to maintain kinship ties and promote wellness. We define sport and athletics as any activities that involve physical movement, sometimes but not always in a competitive nature or for entertainment purposes, and convey cultural knowledge,

values, and skills. In this chapter, we use a resilient, abundance-based approach to research and ask, “What are Indigenous communities doing well to combat the Covid-19 pandemic through sport and physical activity?” and “How are Indigenous athletes and sports a platform to exercise sovereignty?” In asking these questions, we found Indigenous individuals and organizations adopted sport and wellness campaigns using social media to raise awareness and build community as physical distancing guidelines were implemented across the world to limit the spread of Covid-19. Based on practices of “exercising” sovereignty (Ali-Joseph, 2018) in response to Covid-19, we outline protective factors in each section including community, relationality, abundance, strength, and resilience that protect Indigenous athletes and communities from stressors like a pandemic.

### Protective factors for exercising sovereignty

For centuries, Indigenous communities have had to negotiate and fight for political, territorial, spiritual, physical, and humanistic rights, all of which are at the heart of Indigenous sovereignty. Instilled in this fight, are our histories, our languages, our land, and a sense of shared responsibility. As Indigenous Peoples, we have an inherent responsibility and right to “exercising” sovereignty – the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of our cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship (Ali-Joseph, 2018). While sovereignty is typically referred to or connected with an inherent right to govern ourselves within our own land base, we are expanding the assertion of exercising sovereignty to physical movement. Sport and physical activity have long provided a means for people to exercise sovereignty, both individually and collectively. Sport ignites extreme celebration in victory, agony in defeat, unification of community, and a platform to elicit political discussion and social awareness. While these dynamics are present within Indigenous communities, sport also permeates our culture and survivance.

This chapter provides a summary of each exercising sovereignty protective factor, along with Covid-19-related sport and athletic examples. Protective factors discussed were identified by the corresponding authors as illustrative of exercising sovereignty based on a variety of Indigenous sport responses to the Covid-19 pandemic captured in the media. Given our abundance-based Indigenist research approach, we focused on protective factors that have emerged in response to Covid-19, rather than deficit language of stressors or harms caused by the pandemic. Protective factors are generally defined as individual or community attributes that help to lessen the impact of some stressor that would cause harm to individual or community well-being (Henson, Sabo, Trujillo, & Teufel-Shone, 2017; Tudor, Sarkar, & Spray, 2020). There has been limited research on Indigenous Peoples, sport, and protective factors in Indian Country

(Henson et al.). Some research has examined sport as a protective factor for Indigenous First Nations within what is currently known as Australia (Parker et al., 2006). However, examination of protective factors and sport among Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (North America) generally focuses on deficit language related to risk prevention associated with suicide, sexual health, alcohol use, and other substance use (Bruner et al., 2016; Griese, Kenyon, & McMahon, 2016; Moilanen, Markstrom, & Jones, 2014).

Additionally, a theoretical framing through the lens of protective factors furthers understanding of the principle of survivance as performed through exercising sovereignty. The concept of survivance was reimagined by Vizenor (2008), and accounts for the continuity of Indigenous Peoples and societies through conscious and self-determined practices of resistance and survival. Within the context of sport in Indian Country, survivance embodies the ideology of many Indigenous athletes and communities to persevere through exercising sovereignty as highlighted in the protective factors below. We developed a framework for the five protective factors of exercising sovereignty discussed in this chapter (see Figure 1 and Leonard, Welch, & Ali-Joseph, 2020). Notably, the framework features an Indigenous athlete: a Native Hoop dancer. Hoop dancing is an Indigenous sport that combines storytelling and dance and is representative of the intergenerational knowledge embedded within Indigenous sport. The interconnected hoops exemplify the linkages among the identified protective factors for the practice of sport and physical activity in performance of Indigenous cultural, political, and spiritual citizenship. Leveraging exercising sovereignty protective factors promotes an abundance-based approach to Indigenous sport experiences in response to Covid-19, rather than focusing on deficit language of pandemic harm.

#### *Protective factor: community*

While there are thousands of different Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, a consistent bond across Indigenous communities is that sport is a way of life. This is exemplified in the evolution of “Rez Ball” (a unique form of basketball developed on reserves and reservations across Indian Country). Basketball gained popularity as communities recognized the importance of promoting and encouraging Indigenous youth to be physically active to overcome obesity, diabetes, and chronic diseases that are triggered by inactivity. A recent story in *Indian Country Today* recognizes, “Basketball has become a necessary and relevant piece of Native culture. Granted, it’s a new piece of our culture, but it is there – like most pieces of our culture – [it] is dedicated to our children’s survival ...” (Ross, 2012, n.p.). Basketball fosters confidence and motivation for youth, and as communities noticed how support helped their students

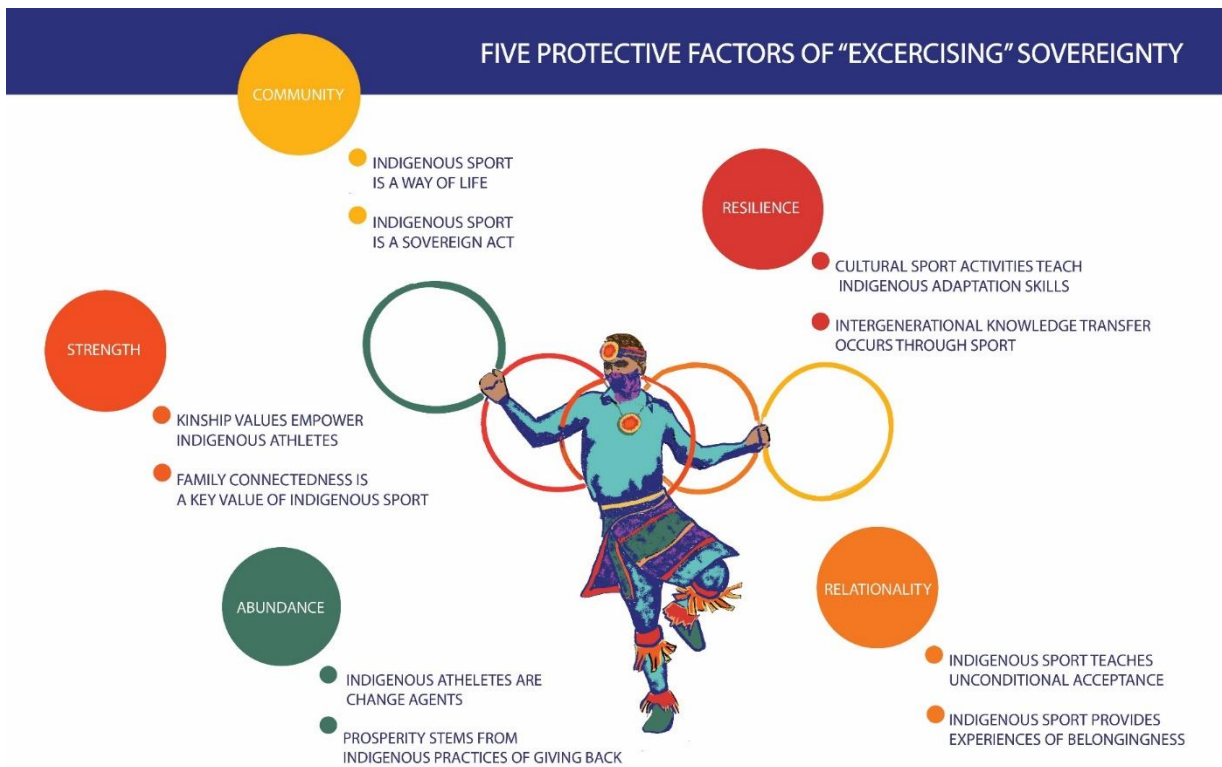


Figure 1: The figure shows the five protective factors of "Exercising" Sovereignty including community, relationality, strength, abundance, and resilience.

win, basketball elicited a sense of community pride. However, Rez Ball and Indigenous athletes are very rarely featured in mainstream sports media.

In the fall of 2000, two Native college students started NDNSports.com to promote awareness of Native American athletes competing in a wide variety of sports. The founders not only work constantly to share the stories of Native athletes, but they also travel across the country to cover competitions. It is hard to measure NDNSports.com’s global impact, but we think of it as nothing less than the “ESPN for NDNs”, bringing together the Native community through their love of sports. Co-founder of NDNSports, Brent Cawhee was at the Men’s Big XII Conference Tournament when the sports world was completely upended by Covid-19. He described it as a shockwave as an NBA player tested positive and the entire league was put on pause (Daniel, Tom, Cahwee, & Welch, 2020). He was there to cover Lindy Waters of Oklahoma State University and Kamaka Hepa of University of Texas, and before their games could begin, an emergency press conference was called to cancel the tournament. Like falling dominoes, all the big college basketball tournaments were canceled. Brent witnessed first-hand how Covid-19 disrupted sports, and specifically the lives of Native student-athletes, who not only had to worry about their seasons ending abruptly, but the sudden uncertainty of their athletic futures. Covid-19 ruptured an

Indigenous way of life, sport, harming many Indigenous athletes and preventing community cultural activities.

Indigenous sport is a sovereign act. Indigenous nations are not only strongly connected, but they also provide a source of strength and protection from the pandemic and the accompanying hysteria. In my (Natalie) homelands of the Qualla Boundary, restrictions were placed on the borders and no one was allowed on the reservation without their Tribal ID or proof of residence. Our Chief, Richard Sneed, enacted this early in March, before the worst of the pandemic had hit the East Coast (McKie, 2020). There were only a handful of positive cases in the region and testing was quickly available for all tribal members at our hospital. Our reservation is in the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains and is a popular byway of National Park tourists from Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Virginia, and the rest of the eastern United States. The closing of our borders made traffic minimal and many families took the opportunity to get outside and enjoy the natural playground. Many began walking, running, hiking, and biking on our land. Those who were normally tethered to their tribal office jobs were free to take their kids outside during the best times of the day without the risk heavy tourist traffic normally brings. The ability of Indigenous nations to control our borders and regulate social distancing activities, including sport, is an exercise of Indigenous sovereignty.

*Protective factor: relationality*

Indigenous sport teaches unconditional acceptance. Running is practice of exercising sovereignty that promotes unconditional acceptance through health and social justice such as awareness raising for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) epidemic. During the 2019 Boston Marathon, Jordan Marie Daniel, a citizen of the Kul Wicasa Oyate (Lower Brule Sioux Tribe), ran the race to advocate for Indigenous womxn. Before beginning the race, she painted a red handprint on her face to break the silence of what is happening to Indigenous womxn and girls. She wrote the letters “MMIW” on her leg as a way for our “stolen sisters” to be seen, heard, and remembered. According to the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, “4 out of 5 of our Native Women are affected by violence today” (CSVAW, 2019, para 1). Running is a responsibility to bring justice and education to MMIW families and communities. Since this injustice was not being seen beyond Indigenous circles, Jordan used her running as a platform to bring awareness, transforming an individual sport into a community message. On May 5, 2020 (National MMIWG awareness day), in the midst of Covid-19, she ran two miles every hour from sunrise to sunset: running to raise awareness for our missing relatives and for a brighter and healthier future. In the webinar, *Global Sport Matters Live: Covid-19 & Sport in Native American Communities*, Jordan stated, “Indigenous women have gone missing three times: Once in life, once in the media and once in the data” (May 15, 2020). This is unfortunately true in relation to many issues within Indigenous communities. Education and awareness through the media are not brought to public attention until a “pandemic” occurs. Jordan acknowledges this and is aware of the impact that sport and running can have to create change. She boldly states, “I use my body as a message and vessel to raise awareness” (May 15, 2020). We love this as it highlights how exercising sovereignty is not merely a metaphor, but an actual physical assertion of strength, growth, and change for unconditional acceptance within Indigenous communities.

Indigenous sport provides experiences of belongingness. Researchers exploring the link between sport and social capital have claimed that sport contributes to “sense of community belonging and provides communities with a real sense of presence” (Zakus, Skinner, & Edwards, 2009, p. 991). In response to the Covid-19 pandemic we have seen Indigenous Peoples utilize social media such as Facebook to reimagine Indigenous sport and physical activity in digital spaces such as the “Social Distance Powwow.” This time of year would normally be when Indigenous Peoples across North America start attending powwows. An uplifting tradition was quickly shifted online to a Facebook group entitled the “Social Distance Powwow,” and as of May 2020, the group had over 180,000 members (Kerndl, 2020). The

Facebook group features dance specials and giveaways celebrating the beauty of Indigenous dance and song, while ultimately building an unprecedented sense of Indigenous belonging through new media. While it is not ideal, organizers applaud it as a new opportunity to share culture across a digital platform while still encouraging the physical activity of dance.

*Protective factor: strength*

Indigenous communities find strength through kinship, which empowers Indigenous athletes. Kinship is a critical piece of identity formation for Indigenous Peoples (Ali-Christie, 2013). Kinship is a social system where relatives are classified and “each pair of relationships is specified in terms of culturally defined patterns of rights and obligations, proper behaviors, and attitudes or emotions” (DeMallie, 1998, p. 322). In late March 2020, the North American Indigenous Games that were to be held in K’jipuktuk (Halifax), Aldershot and Millbrook First Nation were postponed to 2021. It is estimated that this year’s games would have hosted more than 5,000 athletes, coaches and staff from over 700 Indigenous nations. Sporting events like the North American Indigenous Games, the Native American Basketball Invitation, and the Little Native Hockey League, rally our communities for days and weeks to celebrate our love of sport and our Indigenous kinship. Thousands of miles may separate competitors but during competition the community comes together.

In April 2020, the Intertribal Canoe Journey was canceled (Walker, 2020). Canoe Journey would normally bring together Indigenous nations and canoe families from the Pacific Northwest and across Turtle Island for an ocean journey during the summer months visiting along traditional canoe routes and kinship networks. In the cancellation notice posted to Facebook, Snuneymuxw First Nation Chief Mike Wyse stated,

Tribal journeys is celebration of our identity, culture and unifies our Nations all around the Pacific Northwest. We know how important it is at times like this to continue to pass our culture, practices, and traditions, but it is also our tradition to protect our people and ensure everyone is safe when a threat like this pandemic faces us. (2020, para 3)

While the cancellation of these events in response to Covid-19 is devastating, it is necessary to protect our communities. Covid-19 has strengthened those kinship bonds and created new virtual forums for Indigenous sport communication and knowledge transmission.

Family connectedness is a key value of Indigenous sport and a protective factor that upholds strength among Indigenous athletes and communities. Within my (Kelsey) Shinnecock community, fitness classes transitioned online in March 2020 to Facebook through instructional videos. Our

nation had closed our borders and issued stay at home orders to protect our citizens as we are located on Long Island, New York, in the middle of one of the United States' Covid-19 epicenters. However, in response, culture and sport were combined in online instructional videos featuring community dancers leading powwow fitness classes on different dance styles. One video featured two female cousins teaching the Fancy Shawl dance, an aerobic style of dance that is challenging for many, given its fast-paced footwork. Normally, these classes would be offered in person but given physical distancing measures, virtual tools and social media created a new forum for family connectedness and sharing culture through sport.

### *Protective factor: abundance*

Indigenous communities are abundant communities. Prosperity within Indigenous communities stems from Indigenous practices of giving back. Indigenous athletes have led donation campaigns for Indigenous communities impacted by Covid-19. Billy Mills, the Oglala Lakota runner who won the 1964 Olympic Gold Medal in the 10,000 meter race, is the national spokesperson for Running Strong for American Indian Youth. His organization has inspired Indigenous runners and community members to donate money, food, and other essentials to Indigenous communities fighting the pandemic. Using the hashtag #GivingTuesdayNow on social media, Running Strong for American Indian Youth was able to secure the resources necessary to send 22 tons of food to families on Pine Ridge, who otherwise may have gone hungry (Indianz.com, 2020). Similarly, in April 2020, Yatika Starr Fields posted a running challenge to Twitter stating: "Like & share this tweet in the duration of my solo Marathon starting now. For every like & RT until finish- \$1 will be donated to @ndncollective raising awareness/ support for Indian countries covid19 crisis #ndncovid19response #ndncollective #defenddevelopdecolonize." Fields ran 26.2 miles and raised over \$700 to support Covid-19 relief efforts in Indian Country, highlighting how Indigenous athletes responded across scales and in innovative ways to the pandemic. For Indigenous communities giving back is not about how much you give, but that you carry the giving spirit as a part of everyday life.

Similarly, the Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation, an organization created in 2005 by Navajo/Pueblo professional golfer, Notah Begay, has contributed greatly to Indigenous communities. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Notah Begay III established the Covid-19 Response Fund under his NB3 Foundation to help those most in need, including his home community, the Navajo Nation (Leonard, 2020). The Covid-19 Response Fund raised over \$200,000 and has delivered hundreds of food boxes and thousands of gallons of water to communities and families in desperate need of

essential supplies (Keys, 2020). Begay also started a Twitter campaign to raise awareness of the impacts of Covid-19 on elders and worked with star Indigenous athletes (Schilling, 2020) to create video messages to encourage Indigenous Peoples to stay home, using the hashtags #ProtectOurCommunities and #ProtectOurCommunitiesStayAtHome.

In addition to practices of giving back, Indigenous athletes are change agents inspiring their communities and other athletes. As Covid-19 cancelled Indigenous collegiate athletes' academic years and sport seasons, many athletes turned to social media to highlight their athletic identities. On the newer social platform, TikTok, short edited videos showcasing everything from dance moves to fitness challenges were being shared rapidly, as everyone went into quarantine. A challenge where friends passed a makeup brush became a sensation, quickly transforming people from barefaced to made-up with the swipe of the brush across the camera lens. Indian Country caught on to this trend and transformed your average everyday Native to one dressed for ceremony or a powwow. Of course, the intersection of sports with Indian Country was also displayed in a brush challenge, as Native ballers transformed from their uniforms to their nicest clothes and traditional jewelry with the passing of a basketball ("Native Ballers," 2020). The video jumped platforms to Facebook and garnered over 133,000 views.

### *Protective factor: resilience*

Intergenerational knowledge transfer occurs through sport and builds community resilience. Indigenous sport traditions are often learned through elders and traditional knowledge holders. The statement "sport transcends across generations" (Ali-Christie, 2013, p. 315) holds true for Indigenous communities. In this way, Covid-19 poses unique threats to Indigenous communities, including loss of traditional knowledge holders, as Covid-19 disproportionately impacts older populations. Recognizing the challenges facing communities trying to implement physical distancing, Indigenous organizations came together to develop a social media awareness campaign. The Northwest Native American Center of Excellence published a PSA video to Instagram on May 12, 2020 for their campaign #ExercisingSafeSweats in partnership with We R Native, We Are Healers, and the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, to encourage Indigenous athletes and community members to "protect the ones you love by practicing your ways at home." The video relays the message,

Sweats and Ceremonies are important to me. My Way of Life. My Family. My Community. However, if I go I'm not protecting myself and people I Love if I spread the Coronavirus. Our leaders and experts say the virus can be spread by someone even if they do not feel Sick. And if this virus spreads to people with health problems like diabetes or kidney disease - it could really Hurt

them. COVID-19 is a sad reminder of the Ancestors we have Lost to Diseases of the Past. Elders told me to Adapt by practicing Our Ways and working up a sweat at Home. Exercising my Beliefs at home is the best way to keep my Family, Community, and Elders Safe. Now, I'm being Prayerful and Protecting My People, the Knowledge Keepers, and Our Ways of Life. Together We Will Grow Stronger.

The video featured athletes, families, community members, and elders advocating for physical activity but with the ultimate goal of staying home to protect the ones we love: our elders.

Cultural sporting activities that teach Indigenous adaptation skills are also examples of the resilience protective factor in Indigenous communities. At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jingle Dress dancing videos went “viral” (for lack of a better term) (Johnson, 2020). Hundreds of girls and women accepted the Jingle Dress Challenge posted by Liz Salway, from Fort Washakie, Wyoming, in the Wind River Reservation, on Facebook. The post read, “We’re not only doing this for ourselves, but we’re doing this for the world because we need to be able to fight this sickness together and our native ways are the best ways to fight it” (para 18). The Jingle Dress dance is a traditional dance originating with the Anishinaabe and ceremonially a medicine and healing dance. When historian Brenda Child started researching the Jingle Dress, she was surprised that she couldn’t find photos of the style before the 1920s (Cram, 2020). Then it occurred to her that the Jingle Dress was born out of another global crisis, the Spanish Flu of 1918. Similarly, among northeastern Indigenous nations such as the Mashpee Wampanoag, Fire Ball is a ceremonial game where a ball traditionally made out of deerskin is soaked in whale oil and lit on fire as players toss and kick the ball across the playing field (Peters, 1988/89). As Mashpee Wampanoag Chairman Cedric Cromwell explains: “What they do is carry the pain of somebody that is either sick or who has passed to release that pain from them, as a warrior, and heal them, as well as heal themselves and their families” (Wilson, 2016, para 4). This highlights how sport and physical activity are resilient acts of healing built into Indigenous cultures.

## Conclusion

Historically, in Indigenous societies, physical activity and sports held a prominent role in daily life. Over the last decade, Indigenous communities have recognized the importance of re-establishing these undertakings as part of Indigenous traditions to ensure overall health and that cultural protective factors set forth by ancestors continue to be honored. Covid-19 will have long lasting impacts on sport in Indian Country, as this chapter surveyed key moments of Indigenous response at the height of Covid-19, future researchers will need to explore the innovations undertaken by Indigenous athletes and communities during the remainder of the pandemic. The five protective factors of

exercising sovereignty provide a framework for future research, whereby scholars can define additional descriptors within each protective frame that are culturally informed and specific to each individual Indigenous community. Indigenous athletes and communities should be future research partners involved in co-developing and leading future studies on the efficacy of the described protective factors within Indigenous communities.

This chapter explored the responses to Covid-19 by Indigenous communities and athletes across Indian Country and Turtle Island (North America), revealing that Indigenous sport through exercising sovereignty provides five protective factors including community, relationality, strength, abundance, and resilience. This suggests that an Indigenous abundance-based research approach, rather than one centered on risk and vulnerability, should inform future sport scholarship of Indigenous innovation during times of crisis. As authors, athletes, and citizens of Indigenous nations, we acknowledge the hardship Covid-19 caused but hope this chapter speaks to the good sport provided to our people during this time and the collective power of exercising sovereignty.

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