

The All Native Basketball Tournament

The All Native Tournament has played a significant cultural and economic role on the North Coast. First Nations from various communities come together to celebrate their pride and identity as they represent their communities and nations. It is hugely significant and it also offers Prince Rupert an economic boost during the winter months.

Since the early years of this century, basketball has been played in First Nations communities along the coast. It requires little equipment and can be played indoors, a definite plus on this rainy coast.

Teams sometimes travelled from village to village to compete. When the people worked at the salmon canneries on the Skeena River during the summer, the main recreation was playing basketball. It might be in a net loft or on the dock, but somewhere around the cannery you'd find a hoop.

In Prince Rupert, basketball was also very popular. In 1947 the Prince Rupert Basketball Association decided to host the Northern British Columbia Coast Indian Championship tournament.

Seven teams played that year and four hundred people turned out to watch the three day event. The tournament was so successful that the organizers decided to make it an annual event.



Fans and players crowd into the gym for the Opening Ceremonies of the 45th annual All Native Tournament, February, 2004. Photo courtesy ANT Committee.

For the next three years the games were played in the old Civic Centre (where the liquor store is located today). In 1950 the Native Basketball Association took over the organization of the tournament.

The tournament began to lose momentum. In 1951 the weather was so bad that the outlying teams couldn't make it to town. As well, there were few hotels in Prince Rupert at that time, and teams and spectators had difficulty finding accommodation.

In 1953, interest was so low that only four teams registered. To many people, it seemed to be the end of All Native basketball in Prince Rupert.

In the fall of 1959, some of the organizers of the Prince Rupert Basketball Association were lamenting the lack of interest in basketball. Fans weren't supporting it the way they used to. But a local businessman, Irwin Garfield, was the first to suggest bringing back the old tournament. Others agreed, and the Prince Rupert and District All Native Basketball Tournament was created.

The first games were held at the Civic Centre at the beginning of March, 1960. Ten teams competed in the Senior division that year, and five in the Intermediate.

The Kitkatla Excelsiors (later Warriors) were Senior Champions in 1960, 1962 and 1964, and were inducted into the ANT Hall of Fame in 1993. Standing (l to r) Elmer Ridley, Don Brown, Russell Gamble, Fred Gamble, Maurice Tolmie, Richard Robinson. Seated: Ronald Bolton, Chester Bolton (coach), Sam Lewis. Photo courtesy ANT Committee.

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The Senior's final was as exciting as any since, with Kitkatla defeating Kitamaat 61 to 57. The tournament was a huge success, even making a bit of money, and the trend was set.

The old Civic Centre couldn't hold all the people who wanted to watch the final games, so in 1963, the championship games were held in the gym of the new Prince Rupert Senior Secondary School. One thousand

fans packed into the bleachers.

Fire destroyed the Civic Centre in 1968, and the whole tournament shifted to PRSS. The number of teams had to be cut back, as the school gym was reserved for the students in the morning.



Everyone was waiting for the new Civic Centre to be built. Finally, in 1972, it was completed and the tournament could move to the new facility and the number of teams increased.

Into the Nineties

In the early 1990s there was a feeling that the tournament was getting away from its community roots. So-called "super teams" included highly-skilled players recruited and selected from different locations. Many felt this took away from the feeling of connection with the fans and the communities the players were supposed to represent. As a result, since 1992, the rules have been modified to strengthen the community teams and to discourage "super teams."

Other changes have taken place, too. Women were not included in the All Native Tournament until 1993 when the ANT added the Women's Division to its program.

That same year, the Masters' Division for men over 35 was also added. Now there are at least 50 teams competing in the tournament. To accommodate the expansion, a second gym is used. At first Charles Hays Secondary School gym was used, but more recently the Civic Centre Arena has been temporarily transformed into a basketball court with a portable floor.

There is never enough room for all the teams who want to compete. Since 1992, a Qualifying Tournament has been held in November. The top nine teams in the tournament automatically qualify for the next year's games, but the first three teams that are eliminated, along with other interested teams, have to play off in November for two open berths in the February tournament. The tournament continues to grow and change to meet the needs of its players, fans and communities.

In addition, First Nations people have an opportunity to sell their arts and crafts throughout the week in the auditorium, which is always packed with people buying things or socializing with friends.

The All Native Tournament is the largest basketball tournament in Canada. It is a unique cultural and sporting event that had drawn considerable attention over the years from the media. A documentary has been made about the tournament and other television stations across the country have produced shows about the games. It is an amazing event for all who participate.

