

Indigenous American Wrestling

THE UNTOLD STORY OF ORIGIN OF THE SPORT ON TWO CONTINENTS

Introduction



Modern professional wrestling in the form that we know so well today with its kayfabe moves & theatrical story lines, originated in the USA in 1919; it can therefore be defined as a Native American wrestling style but what are the actual origins of the sport in the Americas? A wrestling promoter of some genius named Joseph Raymond “Toots” Mondt formulated the idea of what he called “Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling” when crowds were moving away from wrestling displays in the second decade of the 20th century, to watch the more brutal professional boxing shows. Combining elements of catch as catch can body slams, fisticuffs & acrobatics into a soap opera style of performance, this style of “wrestling” became enormously popular from then on; one only has to watch a modern WWE spectacle to see how far it has come in less than a century.

From its inception Toots Mondt always had the idea of taking stereotypical concepts from American folklore to create drama for these shows & the first of the Native American “Indian Chiefs” comes directly from this era. Chief Shoshone Wingo, who wrestled throughout the 1920s into the era of the Great Depression, was an actual indigenous man from the Shoshone Nation of the Western Plains who became the first in a long line of other chiefs, many of whom were not of First Nation Indigenous American descent, in a tradition that continues to this day; most recently with the Chris Chavis stage name of Tatanka, who is actually a descendant of the Lumbee Nation of North Carolina. The question this article intends to pose “is there really a strong tradition of wrestling indigenous to the Americas?” & the best way to answer this is to explore the anthropological record of the two continents from north to south.

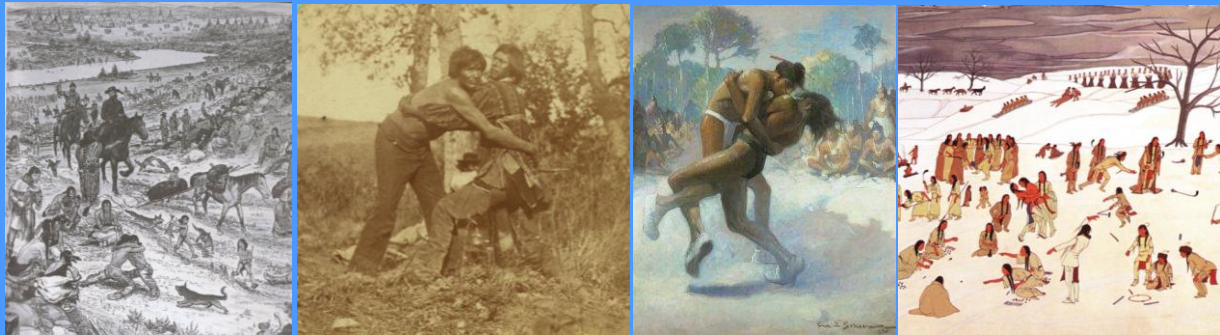
Inuit Wrestling



The Inuit peoples of the Arctic Circle of Alaska, Canada & Greenland still practice various styles of sports that can easily be classified as wrestling. From the Cape Dorset region of Baffin Island the most popular style is called **Panguatut** while on Holman Island a similar sport is played called **Una Tar Tuq**. These are essentially breakstance games in which players start in a catch hold position similar to the famous Scottish backhold, but the first to either lift his opponent up or simply make him move his feet becomes the winner. Other sports are similar to arm wrestling or leg wrestling & there is even a type of tug of war in which opponents try to pull each other backwards from a push up position with a belt wrapped around the back of their heads; these various styles of Inuit wrestling are included in the annual **Arctic Winter Games**, which have been arranged between the Northern First Nations since 1969.

In 1741 however a Danish Christian missionary named Hans Egede visited the Greenland settlements describing the things he saw & he left a clear visual record of the Inuit wrestling tradition from this time. The men apparently wrestled in a more conventional manner, aiming for a toppling victory, while wearing reindeer hide pants & even though this sport seems to have died out amongst modern Inuit people in the Americas, the tradition is still kept alive by the closely related Siberian people of the Chukotsky Peninsular of Russia, connecting Indigenous Americans directly with the Old World culturally. Maybe this style of wrestling could be included as part of the broader Arctic sporting celebrations & the Inuit peoples could have a new addition to their arsenal of Indigenous sports & games.

The Woodland & Plains Indians



Further south from what is now the East Coast of North America there are several 17th century colonial accounts of British & Dutch settlers witnessing wrestling events, especially amongst the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) or Six Nation Iroquois Confederacy, who held wrestling to be a sacred sport handed down directly from Deganawida the Great Peace Maker. Wrestling & Stickball (the ancestor of Lacrosse) were core sports performed around the harvest festival that later became “Thanksgiving” in Canada & the USA, these were considered essential peace keeping rituals. The professional wrestlers Chief Joseph War Eagle (1899-1979), his son Chief Don Eagle (1925-1966) & Billy Two Rivers Kaientaronkwen (1935-present) were all from the Mohawk tribe of the Iroquois Nation & the Iroquois High School in New York State has a very distinguished sports wrestling program, keeping this tradition alive.

A visual record of the wrestling style of the Plains Indians, from an illustrated explorer’s journal in 1810, was also retained describing the Blackfoot wrestling tradition of Nebraska, what was then the Western frontier of the USA. Mostly, similar to the Inuit tradition, this involved a catch hold start this time from kneeling position, but the object was to forcibly throw the opponent down once they had stood up. Photos were captured of two Winnebago men practicing this same tradition in Minnesota in the 1870s but by & large, due to the destruction of culture throughout the 20th century, this tradition seems to have vanished. The famous American painter Frank Earle Schoonover beautifully captured this sporting form in his painting from the 1920s showing “Indian Wrestlers” from Oklahoma & Dick West, who was the first Indigenous American to gain a degree in fine arts, did likewise with his painting of the “Cheyenne Winter Games” from 1958. This shows that the tradition was at least retained in the memory of his generation but how much of it has survived today is very hard to ascertain. In Canada a martial arts instructor named George Lepine has brought about a revived cultural awareness of the Aboriginal wrestling ways of his Cree ancestry through his system of training called **Oki Chi Taw** <http://www.nativemartialarts.com/> & other instructors from the Choctaw (Adrian Chief Roman’s **Tushkahoma** system) & Cherokee (Henry Adam’s **Inikte** system) First Nations are following a similar path. The **North American Indigenous Games**, which have been going since 1990, include wrestling as part of its competition circuit but this follows the rules of international freestyle wrestling rather than reviving indigenous wrestling. The **National Wrestling Hall of Fame Museum** however has produced a booklet “**The Native American Wrestling Experience**” recording the contribution Indigenous Americans have made to the sport which can be found at their website <http://www.wrestlingmuseum.org/>

Lucha Tarahumara



In the Northern Mexican State of Chihuahua live the Tarahumara people, who are one of the largest First Nations in the whole of the Americas & due to their relative isolation in the Sierra Madre Mountains, they have managed to keep their wrestling tradition alive. Lucha Tarahumara, or **Najarapuame** as it is called in their language, is likewise a catch hold style but this time a belt is used for the main hold & opponents try to swing each other off balance for the toppling victory.

Najarapuame retains many of its pre-Columbian rituals even though it is mostly performed during Easter celebrations, things such as the chants sung during the competitions, the celebratory drinking of maize beer after the event as well as marriage arrangements clearly demonstrate its pagan origins & the Tarahumara consider the sport as essential to their cultural identity. Public schools throughout Chihuahua & neighbouring Sinaloa hold regular **Najarapuame** tournaments on sawdust rings in which both boys & girls participate, ensuring the vital survival of this ancient custom.

The organisation called **Federacion Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autoctonos y Tradicionales A.C.** as per their own website <http://www.jcarlosmacias.com/autoctonoytradicional/> was established by the Mexican Government in 1988 to preserve the pre-Columbian sports & games of the country. Lucha Tarahumara is part of this rich heritage & there was once talk of holding a national championship to be auspiced by the Mexican Wrestling Federation as part of their traditional wrestling program, which would then spread the sport much further than Northern Mexico where it is currently confined.

Lucha Libre & Ocelotl

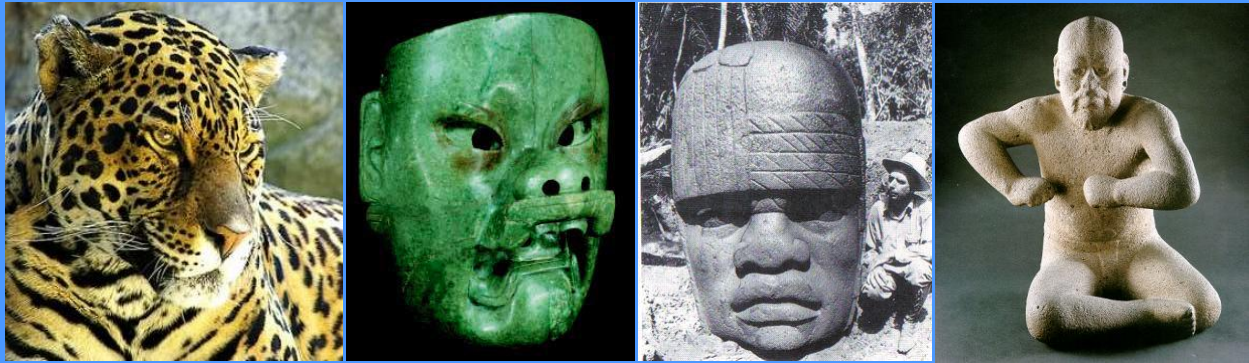


Of course most people already know that **Lucha Libre**, the Latino form of professional wrestling, is the most popular expression of the sport in Mexico but what many don't realise is that the iconography of the performances is directly relatable to the pre-Columbian period. For example the jaguar motif is a common expression of Mexican machismo, which is often seen in the names & mascarás (masks) of the luchadores.

The **Ocelotl** or Jaguar Knights of the Aztec Empire were one of two elite troops, the other being the Eagle Knights, which always went to battle on the front line. Dressed in quilted armour while wearing a jaguar shaped helmet & jaguar spotted outfit, they would charge into battle using their macuahuitl or obsidian edged broad swords, trying to capture as many enemy combatants as possible, to be later taken back to the capital of Tenochtitlan for sacrifice at the main temple. The **Ocelotl** were considered the most fearsome of soldiers, much like the commandos of today & memory of this is still retained in modern Mexican culture, popularly expressed in Lucha Libre performances. The **Ocelotl** would also hold gladiatorial fights with enemy combatants on specially prepared stone circle platforms in the ceremonial centre of Tenochtitlan & according to Spanish records, thousands of spectators would watch these events, preempting the growth of **Lucha Libre** by five centuries.

There is a group in Mexico City that are actively reviving the Aztec martial arts by combining them with the East Asian styles of judo, karate & kung fu to create a new fusion called **Xilam-Arte Mexicano de Pelea** which can be seen at the website <http://www.xilam.org/> As part of their curriculum they offer training in traditional weapons like the macuahuitl & atl atl spear thrower as well as traditional warrior dances that are retained from folklore.

Olmec Jaguar Motif



This Mexican jaguar motif can be traced much further back in time & the animal was central to the religion of one of the earliest civilisations of Mesoamerica, the Olmec. The most common image found in the artwork of that era, which stretches back nearly 4,000 years, shows what anthropologists call the were-jaguar child, the offspring of a mating between a god jaguar father & human mother, with its peculiar down turned mouth in fierce facial expression.

The large basalt heads that the Olmec are so famous for may also depict a version of this deified mythical being, wearing protective headgear like a modern athlete. In 1933 a farmer in Vera Cruz State in Southern Mexico uncovered a 66cm high statuette that is now held in the Museo Nacional de Antropologia of Mexico City. This is considered one of the greatest pieces of realistic art from the Olmec civilisation & although formally known as Antonio Plaza Monument 1 it most often referred to as El Luchador Olmeca, the Olmec Wrestler.

Danzas de los Tigre



Throughout modern Oaxaca & Guerrero States in south western Mexico, the widespread & popular “**Danzas de los Tigre**” tradition continues to entertain people at public fiestas. The jaguar is considered a mischievous metaphorical figure & acrobatic dancers dressed as this animal, complete with beautiful jaguar masks, taunt & torment spectators often with amusing results, during festive street parades.

These jaguar dances are taken to another level with the “**Tigre Fights**” in the towns of Acatlan & Zitlala in the Guerrero highlands each May. In Acatlan the men meet in a highly ritualised form of street combat & try to whip each other with solid rope clubs while wearing elaborate jaguar masks. In Zitlala the combat looks more like a conventional boxing match with jaguar masks but whatever the case, the outcome is the same & it is believed that the blood spilled during such events is vital to bring the rains for the next year’s harvest.

Nobody knows how long this tradition has been maintained but Zapotec artwork seems to show similar events in the region more than two millennia ago & it is an echo of the more well known Aztec blood sacrifice ritual. Artwork found in several ancient ruins, such as Teopantecuanitlan, connect the Olmec civilisation throughout this region & the jaguar is found depicted in either painting or stone carvings, demonstrating the longevity of the tradition, which although outlawed by Holy Inquisition since 1631, has never the less continued to thrive.

Chupa Porrazo



The **Tigre Fights** of Acatlan & Zitlala are synchronised so that spectators can travel to both sites to witness the spectacle in a kind of religious pilgrimage but there is also a third event that finalises everything on this holy calendar. In the town of Tixtla the jaguar fighters actually limit their combat to wrestling only in a more controlled outlet of aggression.

In the city of Chilpancingo, also in Guerrero State, this form of traditional wrestling becomes even more spectacular during pre Christmas celebrations. As part of an elaborate street performance involving 15 different characters that retells a story expressed in colourful dance narrative, men from each of the city's suburbs dressed as comical looking hunters, called *tlacoleros*, herd men dressed as jaguars, called *tecuaní nagual*, through the city into the major bullfighting ring.

Called **Chupa Porrazo del Tigre**, translated as the 'suck fall of the tiger', spectators watch these jaguar warlocks wrestle each other for the honour of their suburbs & ethnic identity. Similar "Tlacolero Dance" performances can be seen in other cities such as Chichihualco, Taxco, Iguala, Atlixac, Jaleaca, Ocotito and Acapulco during the particular town saint fiestas throughout the year but this must be one of the least known major traditional wrestling events of the world.

South American Jaguars



A similar jaguar iconography as found in Mesoamerican art is continued into the South American continent. The Muisca Chibcha people of Bogota in Colombia were recorded in early 16th century Spanish chronicles to have held major wrestling tournaments & nearby archeological sites such as San Agustin show what looks like a jaguar god carved in stone, demonstrating a likely connection between the jaguar & human combat in this region.

The Chavin Civilisation of the high Andes Mountains in Peru was not only contemporary with the Olmec of Mesoamerica but likewise the jaguar was a central deity in their shamanistic religion, as seen in the stone carvings that have survived from this culture. The Moche Civilisation of the Pacific Coast of Peru also reproduced images of the jaguar in their pottery & other artwork styles; we know that wrestling was a popular tradition amongst these people because it was expressed through the same ceramic medium & there is no reason to think that the sport wasn't more widespread throughout the entire region.

Takanakuy



Takanakuy translates as “when the blood is boiling” in Kechwa, the indigenous language of Peru & it is a kind of annual traditional combat festival. This may not seem like the best way to spend Christmas but in the town of Chumbivilcas in Cuzco Province, people have been gathering & using this as a way to settle personal & family disputes since the time of Tawantinsuyu or the Inca Empire, the largest pre-Columbian polity in all the Americas. The Sapa Inca or Emperor would judge popular combat displays held in the centre of Cuzco to test the elite warriors in duels but in those days fighting was usually done in full armour using a wide array of weapons, most of which were made of bronze.

When the Spanish Conquistadores took control of the empire they continued the tradition of combat displays but this was mostly done using African slaves, in a sort of gladiatorial human cock fighting. In 1560 in the Antabamba District of Huaquirca Province there was an indigenous revolt called Taki Onqoy lead by a man named Juan Chocne who opposed all things Spanish & so on Christmas Day, a time usually reserved for peace & good will to men, violent fights were arranged. **Takanakuy** Festivals still occur in Antabamba but the tradition also spread to Chumbivilcas & other regions sometime in the last 450 years but whatever the case, the performance is exactly the same.

Combatants often wear colour patterned black woolen balaclava masks called *uyach’ulla*, sometimes with small animals or birds on top, which symbolise the African fighters of the bygone era & they usually have leather legging covers called *qarawatanas*, which are used as protection during kicking melees. They dance into the arena in a highly ritualised manner & soon after spontaneous fights break out; although it is rare to see grappling techniques involved, there is almost no limits in the fighting & combatants punch, kick & do whatever is necessary to make the opponent concede.

Tinku



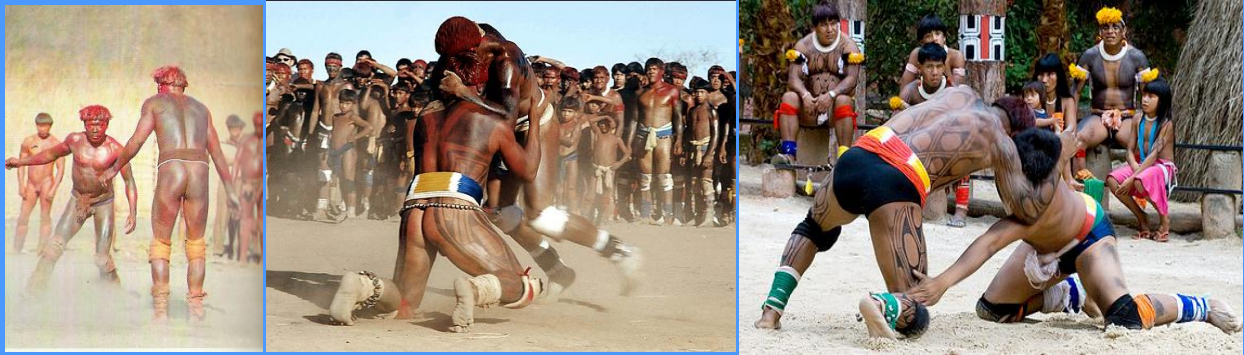
In the Potosi Province of Bolivia, the towns of Macha & Pacoata hold a similar combat festival each May. **Tinku** means “physical attack” in the language of the indigenous Aymara people; the event is always surrounded by drinking, feasting alongside traditional music & dance. Closely associated with the Pachamama religion of the region, it is said the blood of the combatants fertilises the soil when it is spilled so the **Tinku** has much in common with the **Tigre Fights** of Mexico, which are coincidentally or not held at the same time.

Men often wear leather montera headgear that resembles the helmets worn by the Conquistadores, leather gloves & thick belts around their waist for extra protection. The fighting is very violent with punches, kicks & in the past rocks were used to add force to the strikes. Due to the number of fatalities, government troops are now sent to the towns to supervise the fights but women are not barred from testing themselves in these often brutal confrontations.

The **Fighting Cholitas** of the City of El Alto (neighbouring the capital La Paz), subject of an award winning documentary in 2006, echo this idea of indigenous female combat in Bolivia. This is essentially a type of professional wrestling or more correctly *lucha libre*, in which paying customers watch theatrical performances for pure entertainment. It shows however that the traditional fighting system of Bolivia may be evolving into wrestling simply to control the damage done in such aggressive displays, as has happened to traditional fighting sports the world over.

The **Ceremonial Tinku Combat** has also developed another offshoot to curb violence & it shares its name with one of the national cultural dances of Bolivia. The **Tinku Festive Dance** is done from a crouching stance, in imitation of the fights, to the loud beats of drums with melodies provided by guitars & panpipes; the costumes worn are very colourful & unlike the seriousness of the combat ritual there is always a great sense of joy associated with these performances.

Huka Huka



In the Xingu River Valley of Mato Grosso State in South Central Brazil, Los Indios as Indigenous Americans are called, hold **Huka Huka** wrestling tournaments during the commemorative funerary rites of the annual Kuarup Festival. Nearly all the First Nations of the region, such as the Kamayura, the Kayapo, the Kuikuro, the Waura & the Yawalapiti, practice this custom & **Huka Huka** wrestling is widespread in the Amazon Basin.

Just like in Mexico & other parts of South America, the jaguar is the central animal imitated in this form of combat; the name of the sport itself, **Huka Huka**, is even said to come from the growling sound made by this large feline. According to myth, the great culture hero, MaWatsinin, who was half jaguar himself, was the one who invented the rules of the sport to restore peace to the ancestors of the people of the rainforest.

Decked out with thick belts, knee guards, shin guards & painted in a red vegetable dye called urucu, the wrestlers begin by circling each other while continuously uttering the phrase huka huka. They then progress to a kneeling position while still facing one another & as soon as they reach out their hands, combat begins. Contest can be won in any of three ways; if the wrestler simply grabs his opponent's leg for a position of control, if he manages to lift his opponent off the ground to throw him or if the opponent's back touches the ground, all of these moves are attempted most often before the opponent has even had a chance to stand up.

Jogos dos Povos Indígenas



The dynamism of the indigenous Amazonian form of jaguar wrestling makes it an exciting sport to watch & because the custom is central to the identity of the Xingu natives, their daily training produces athletes that could easily compete on a world scale. The **Huka Huka** is included as one of the 13 sporting events of the **Jogos dos Povos Indígenas**, the Brazilian Indigenous Peoples Games, bringing it a much wider exposure to the international community. An annual event, it has been going since 1996; because it is funded by the Brazilian Ministry of Sport & FUNAI the organisation for indigenous people, over 1000 athletes from 60 First Nations participate, with tens of thousands of spectators watching this Indigenous American version of the Olympics.

Besides **Huka Huka** another style of wrestling is also included not just in these Games but also the **National Indigenous Cultural Festival** held in the City of Bertioga each April & it is called Luta Corporal in Portuguese or **Idjassu** in the Karaja language of Tocantins State. This is a purely standing catch hold style very similar to Scottish backhold except that competitors wear grass skirts & are painted in elaborate designs. Women are encouraged to compete in this sport but never the less this proves that long before the invention of capoeira, Brazilian jujitsu, luta livre esportiva or vale tudo, combat sports have always been a part of the Brazilian cultural experience.

Kalaka Mulaka



The final style of Native American wrestling of note comes from the Yaghan people of Tierra del Fuego (Land of Fire), an island at the southern tip of South America, who practiced a type called **Kalaka Mulaka**. According to Father Martin Gusinde, a German priest who went on several large expeditions into the region between 1917 & 1923, the tradition began when a fight broke out between two ancestral bird ancestors & the sport has been used to control hostilities since time immemorial.

The Yamana Sea Nomads, as they were called by Gusinde, are now recognised to have reached as far as the Falkland Islands 500km into the Atlantic Ocean, we know this because of the now extinct warrah or misnamed Falkland Islands Fox (killed by sheep farmers in the 19th century), which was actually a small domesticated hunting dog brought to the islands by the Yaghan & the remains of a thousand year old canoe that was once buried in sand, amongst several other artifacts found around the archipelago in more recent times. There are other enigmatic clues that show the Yaghan may have also reached the South Shetland Islands, South Orkney Islands & islands around the Antarctic Peninsula; therefore this style of traditional wrestling, **Kalaka Mulaka**, could have been the only one practiced on the Seventh Continent (Antarctica).

The Yaghan were a remarkably resilient people who lived in an environment as harsh as that of the Inuit in the Arctic, adapting to it both physically & culturally but were unable to survive the onslaught of European Colonisation. Their culture is retained only in memory, even though several thousand mixed ancestry descendants still live in the region, but we do know enough about **Kalaka Mulaka** to at least give a brief description of it. It was considered a fight for honour & men would ceremonially paint themselves in elaborate designs before combat (as can be seen in photographic record), which was done in the middle of a circle formed by a crowd of spectators. As a challenge, one of the contestants would place a kalaka, a small animal skin ball stuffed with fur, at the feet of the one he wished to fight & soon after the wrestling began. The object was to pin the opponent on the ground until he conceded & although tripping was forbidden in stand up wrestling, it was considered fair game to try to knee the opponent's thighs out from under him from a grappling hold, so it resembled modern Thai Boxing in some ways.

Conclusion

When & even how the first human beings arrived in the Americas is a matter of some scientific argument at present but until these debates are allowed to run their course, it must at least be accepted that Indigenous Americans did contribute greatly to the overall development of human culture for the entire world. As has been demonstrated in this article, there is a strong tradition of wrestling native to the Americas, as much as on any other continents & not just in stereotypical concept either, even though in many places these customs have been lost for several generations.

This is not to say that this tradition cannot be revived in those places but this all starts with basic education. If people are generally unaware that these traditions once existed then it becomes a responsibility to inform them & this at least is the main premise of this article. Indigenous people on both continents should be encouraged to build cultural bridges & sports are the ideal way to do this when language acts an actual barrier to deeper levels of communication. The fact that the jaguar was the symbol for wrestling & indeed combat in general throughout the whole of Latin America, could bring some sense of unity to these diverse traditions & celebrity wrestlers from the WWE or Lucha Libre companies could also prove helpful in bringing a greater level of awareness of this tradition to the world.

In Brazil the Indigenous Peoples Games demonstrates what can be done to assist in the revival of Aboriginal cultures when intent & will are applied at a national level; the Brazilian Government even now sends invites to other First Nation people throughout the world to participate in these Games. Imagine what could be achieved if the numerous governments of the Americas united in this cause & restored pride in their own national native ethnic identities through a Festival of Indigenous American Wrestling, what an amazing sight to behold this would be!

The Coreeda Association of Australia December 2010