



INDIGENOUS ROOKIE LEAGUE

What is Indigenous Rookie League?

Indigenous Rookie League is a unique inter-generational baseball league that increases physical and mental health outcomes for children and youth, while also promoting healing through inter-generational connections and community collaboration. Each league runs for a minimum of 8 weeks throughout the summer and works towards significant health and social outcomes.

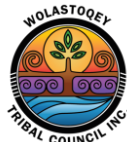
How did Indigenous Rookie League Start?

In 2015, Jays Care Foundation partnered with Kenora Chiefs Advisory (KCA), an alliance of nine independent First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. The partnership was born out of a desire from leadership in all 9 First Nations to develop a baseball league that could reignite a long-forgotten passion for baseball in the area while also addressing some of the persistent mental health challenges faced by youth, particularly in the summertime. The idea was to use baseball as a tool to engage children, youth and adults in regular inter-generational play. Leaders in the community worked with Jays Care to develop a league that enables young and old to play together, encourages and enhances community pride, and creates a safe enough space that it both attracts and retains youth who often sit on the fringes. What evolved from this partnership is now called Indigenous Rookie League. Leagues currently operate in more than 50 First Nations and one urban city centre across the country.

For whom was Indigenous Rookie League developed/designed?

Indigenous Rookie League is designed for groups of neighbouring Indigenous nations interested in creating an inter-community and inter-generational baseball league. In some cases, an Indigenous Rookie League may be accessible to larger communities looking to create an intra-community league. The check- list below can help determine if your community or organization is a good fit for an Indigenous Rookie League:

- ✓ Are there limited accessible sport and recreation opportunities for children and youth in your communities throughout the summer?
- ✓ Is there limited programming with opportunities for intergenerational connection?
- ✓ Is there an appetite for baseball or softball in the area?
- ✓ Are there places to play baseball or softball?
- ✓ Is leadership keen to find new ways to promote community connection, healing and hope?
- ✓ Are there local volunteers, youth workers, probation officers, prevention workers or community leaders who would be willing to volunteer as coaches?
- ✓ Are multiple communities close enough to be able to play against each other each week (i.e. no more than 2.5 hours driving distance away)? Or is the community big enough to create an in-house league?



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What makes Indigenous Rookie Leagues unique?

Indigenous Rookie Leagues are unique in their design as they are built to address very specific and localized health and social outcomes. Together with Jays Care, partners identify the health and social goals that are most important to them, and an Indigenous Rookie League is designed specially to target those goals. The way baseball or softball is played is altered significantly, so that those outcomes can be achieved. From the composition of teams to the practice protocols, to how teams earn points during games and outside of games – the entire system is designed with those goals in mind. While many baseball and softball leagues are designed to help children and youth develop core baseball and softball skills, skill development in Indigenous Rookie League is secondary to achieving larger social and health outcomes.



What are the goals of Indigenous Rookie Leagues?

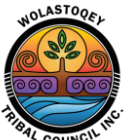
All Indigenous Rookie Leagues focus on core long-term health and social outcomes as determined by the local organization hosting the league. In addition, all leagues generally focus on these **six shorter-term goals**:

- 1) Enhance the self confidence and self-esteem of children and youth (particularly those on the margins);
- 2) Enhance the overall physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health of children and youth;
- 3) Connect communities together through sport and provide opportunities for sharing of culture;
- 4) Create opportunities for inter-generational connection through sport and play;
- 5) Promote strong community leadership and provide leadership opportunities to youth; and
- 6) Provide opportunities for success through baseball that children and youth can apply to other areas of their lives.

What are some common features that every Indigenous Rookie League includes?

While each league is unique, all Indigenous Rookie Leagues include the following two essential components:

- 1) **A unique point system that emphasizes community engagement over winning:** Innovative point systems allow the league to shine a light on the values that matter most to the area, and on the strengths that team members bring (above and beyond their baseball skills). At minimum, all league point systems include points for the following: 1) number of players who attend each practice/game, 2) number of fans who attend, 3) winning the game, 4) having an Elder open the game, 5) completing team practices, 6) providing a meal/snack for the visiting team, 8) having a Chief or Council member attend each game
- 2) **Opportunities for Intergenerational participation:** All Indigenous Rookie Leagues include opportunities to engage all community members, both young and old. Strengthening the connection between generations has proven to be one of most effective tools for enhancing hope, resiliency and community pride. Examples of ways that leagues do this include:
 - ✓ **Endless Adult Roles:** The goal of every Rookie League practice and game is to ensure a memorable experience for everyone involved! Think about how you can bring the Major League experience to your community – have an announcer, broadcast the game through Facebook live, offer a meal for both teams, host a super fan zone, a skills competition, a training session, ceremonial first pitches, traditional song, drum circle, dance; all of these components require adult support to make them a reality!
 - ✓ **Get Adults in the Game:** Many leagues incorporate adults into their Rookie League games. For example, think about designating two innings of every ball game as the “adult innings,” where the adults from each community get the chance to put their skills to the test and the youth get a chance to cheer them on!



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- ✓ **Adult Pre-game Competitions:** Create a pre-game tradition that includes an adult competition! The adult competition can be simple but still super fun and put their baseball skills to the test – examples include a target toss challenge, longest throw contest, home run derby or a relay race! The winning team of the adult competition can earn an in-game advantage, such as home field or a chance to start the game up 1- 0! Adults can be silly too—when they are, it contributes to the safe and fun environment.
- ✓ **In-Game Activities:** Offer activities and contests for adults to participate in between innings. Some ideas include throwing the closest ball to the base, whacky relay race, dice toss and guess the final score!
- ✓ **Offer a Community Gift Exchange:** Invite adults from both teams to prepare a gift that is symbolic of their community and have them exchange gifts prior to the start of the game.



What are some of the unique features that can be tailored for local leagues?

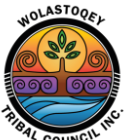
Each league needs to clearly establish their goals, values, league point systems, league schedule, league tournaments, league rules and rewards before the league launches. Some key questions that organizations and League Coordinators work through with Jays Care’s support as part of this process include:

- Five years from now, what do you hope this league will have accomplished?
- Who NEEDS to be involved in the league for those goals to become reality?
- How do we make sure that the children and youth who MOST NEED this league get involved? How old can youth be to be players? How old do they need to be to be coaches (or assistant coaches)? What is the most effective strategy for recruiting them? What will get in the way of them coming? How do we remove those barriers?
- What makes for an ideal coach? How do we find them? How do we support and retain them? What is the plan if they don’t show up?
- How often should practices happen? What kind of points should teams earn for practices? How will we score those? How will we track those points?
- How often should games happen? How will we organize transportation? What responsibilities will visiting teams have? Will hosting teams have? What are the game-play rules? How will pitching work? What adjustments can we make for the unique needs of each individual player? Are they safe for younger and older players? What equipment will we use? How will we score points during the games? How will we incorporate adults during the game? How will spectators be included and/or rewarded? How are MVP’s selected? What characteristics are most valuable in your league? Who gets to decide on game-day MVP’s?

How does Jays Care support the process?

When Jays Care commits to supporting your vision, we commit for the long-haul. Our intention is to help you design, launch and sustain a league that will have transformational impacts. That’s why we build in all of these key supports along the way:

1. **DESIGN SUPPORT:** Jays Care Foundation works with select partnering Indigenous agencies and organizations to support the local design of an Indigenous Rookie League. This design process takes time and is most successful when many different members of local communities are engaged (from leadership to Elders to youth). The process results in clear goals and values for the league, practice plans, point systems, outreach strategies, rewards, game-play schedules and tournament plans.



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2. **LEAGUE COORDINATOR TRAINING & SUPPORT:** Next, Jays Care works with the locally assigned League Coordinator to help them further establish plans for the league. This includes hosting a multi-day training for all League Coordinators so they can learn from and be inspired by each other. In addition, Jays Care works with League Coordinators to help establish locally relevant tools and training plans for coaches, point collection systems, advertisements, recruitment tactics and success measurement tools.



3. **COACH AND ATHLETE RECRUITMENT SUPPORT:** In the first couple of years of a new league, Jays Care staff will visit communities to help League Coordinators rally enthusiasm and awareness among children, youth and community members. We call this the Community Tour. During the tour, our staff host fun visits to schools and community centers, and work with the League Coordinator to host and lead dynamic training for identified coaches.

4. **ON-GOING SUPPORT:** Throughout the 8+ weeks of the league, Jays Care staff liaise often with the League Coordinator to ensure they have the support they need to run a wildly innovative and successful league while navigating any issues that arise.

5. **TOURNAMENT PLANNING SUPPORT:** All leagues wrap up with a creative and celebratory tournament. Jays Care supports the League Coordinator to plan and lead this event and to include key assessment tools into the event so that athletes and community members have the chance to provide key feedback on the league. In the first couple years of the league, Jays Care sends staff to support the implementation of the tournament.

6. **EQUIPMENT, UNIFORMS & FUNDING:** Jays Care works with partners to identify equipment, uniform and funding needs that we can support so that each league is equipped to run a robust program.

7. **REGIONAL TOURNAMENT:** At the end of the season, Jays Care coordinates regional tournaments for member leagues to participate in. These fun tournaments give youth from various regions across the country the chance to connect with each other, play ball and celebrate their seasons.

8. **DEBRIEF:** In October, Jays Care works with partners to organize comprehensive debriefs where we review feedback from community members, organizers and athletes and make plans for enhancing the league in future years.

I'm interested. What's next?

If you are keen to launch an Indigenous Rookie League in your area please contact Rebecca Lansley at rebecca.lansley@bluejays.com or 647-248-8796.

Who Advises Indigenous Rookie League?

All final decisions about the league are made by the Indigenous Rookie League Governing Body. These are the key decision-makers from each of the founding organizations. We also seek feedback and advice from our Technical Working Group which leverages the knowledge and experience of people who have played an integral role in the creation of an Indigenous Rookie League and have the skills and expertise to advise Jays Care on best practices for the growth, further development and cultural competency of the league.

