



## Supporting mental wellness in an Indigenous community by enhancing sports and recreation opportunities

### **T**HE ESKASONI FIRST NATION IN CAPE

Breton puts a priority on supporting mental wellness for its young population through rich sports and recreation programming. The synergies between sports and mental health are not only recognized on a philosophical level but are embedded in formal structures in the community.

Eskasoni Sports and Recreation and Eskasoni Mental Health work together in the same building – a facility built and supported by ACCESS Open Minds as part of a research project bringing innovative mental health-care models to Indigenous communities (with Eskasoni First Nation being the first.) And Matthew Gould, a youth team lead for mental health and an experienced counsellor, was recently named Sports and Recreation Coordinator – giving him an official title to match his long history of organizing physical activities and other events in the community.



ESKASONI SPORTS AND RECREATION/  
ESKASONI MENTAL HEALTH,  
NOVA SCOTIA

**Canada**

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Emerald Gideon, Youth Recreation Assistant

Those who run sports programs often provide a bridge to mental health services, Matthew says.

“Workers who are out on the sports fields are role models and the kids look up to them. Being on the front lines, they get to know the young people and often, their parents,” he says. “If they learn a child or youth is struggling, they are in a position to connect them to support services. And members of the community recognize that sports and recreation and mental health services closely collaborate.”

Like many Indigenous communities in Canada, Mi’kmaq community of Eskasoni First Nation has a young population; more than 50 per cent of the 4,500 people in the community are under the age of 25. Fostering and protecting mental wellness through sports and recreation is particularly important with so many young people, Matthew says.

“It was difficult when COVID-19 cases were higher and we had to restrict events, and young people were spending a lot of time inside their homes,” he says. “It was great when things began to open up and summer came, giving us new opportunities to keep our youth active.”

Matthew and his team organized a series of events to re-energize youth engagement with activities that included a Bike Hub, where people could get their bikes fixed; a SUPERNova science-oriented camp supported by Dalhousie University; a surfing program at Point Michaud Beach; and a Just Paddle It festival in partnership with Atlantic Division Canoe Kayak Canada to get people involved in kayaking, canoeing and paddle-boarding. And a baseball camp supported by the Blue Jays Care Foundation (in partnership with KidSport) had a particularly high rate of participation through the summer.



MR Gould, Mentor for the CPRA Youth Employment Experience

The sports and recreation team also puts on community events including an annual traditional powwow that helps young people learn more about their Indigenous culture. In 2022, Eskasoni youth will participate in the Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq Summer Games. Eskasoni First Nation has hosted the games a number of times and next year, the host community will be Potlotek First Nation.

With big plans to further boost sports programming for the fall and winter, Matthew recognized he needed support to help him handle his multiple responsibilities. He received that support through the CPRA Youth Employment Experience program, which provided him with funding to hire a Youth Recreation Assistant. Emerald Gideon – who previously worked as a youth peer-support worker alongside Matthew and is from the community – was hired for the job.

“I know about Emerald’s skills and her passion for sports and recreation,” Matthew says. Emerald says she can see herself developing a career in the sports and recreation field, and she says she has been energized by seeing kids getting involved again after the pandemic. “It’s great to see kids once again out there being active, having fun and enjoying their sports.”

Emerald will support Matthew as he undertakes his next big project: setting up indoor sports programming in the recently completed gymnasium inside the ACCESS Open Minds Youth Space.

“We received funding that allowed us to purchase \$26,000 worth of sports equipment for kids and adults,” says Matthew. “We’re looking at sports that include volleyball, basketball, floor hockey, badminton, tennis and lacrosse. We’re very excited to get the programs up and running and put all that great equipment to use for our community.” 🍁