Lacrosse

Political Organization in North America as Reflected in Athletic Competition

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Introduction

The increasing popularity of lacrosse on college playing fields and in other schools and clubs throughout North America reflects the renewed interest in a vigorous sport which is native to this continent. A review of the origins of this fast moving competition offers us some insight into the lives of the people who introduced the sport to the European immigrants. Just as interesting is what this information reveals about those native peoples who did not play lacrosse, or any other sport of this kind.

Origins and Early Descriptions

Lacrosse or bagatayaw (from Ojibwa paganayaban), a complex team sport first noted by Europeans in 1662, may have evolved with the formation of the league of the Iroquois (Five Nations) in the late 1500s. The Five Nations people (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk tribes) have from that time until fairly recently been the best known players of this game. Originally, lacrosse was played with a stick and a bent or hooked end (see Fig. 2a, right), which the European thought resembled a shepherd's crook or a bishop's crozier. The latter analogy led to the sport being named "la crosse" by the French.

Although the sport may have been over 100 years old before greater than that of the modern crosse made that a player could hit the ball, as in tennis, or use the crosse to stop the ball before picking it up again with the webbed end. The wooden ball formerly used in play was noted as being shaped more like a turkey's egg than round. Playing field sizes were agreed upon by the competing teams in these early contests. The first accounts mention sizes ranging from 500 to 600 paces up to 1.5 miles (2.5 km.) in length. The two teams were equal in size, but team size could vary with the number of players available. Teams as large as 1,000 were reported, and if accurate must reflect the size of the adult male populations of an entire Five Nations village, although some early accounts suggest that women often were included on these teams. In these early competitions the number of goals needed to win a

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Nicholas Perrot wrote his first important description in 1662 (see Perrot 1911), we have no direct evidence of its existence prior to that date. Perrot provided several descriptions of the game during the period from 1662 to 1669, and Woff (1977:16) notes that an Abbe Fland in 1768 provided supplemental descriptions of these contests (see Converse 1908:145).

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The Cherokee ball players from Wolfsou, North Carolina, 1885 (see Culin 1907, opp. p. 596).
petitions have been held, and lacrosse was an early addition during the development of the modern Olympics. The present-day crosse is a short hockey shaft about 3 to 4 feet long (1–1.3 m.), with one end permanently bent after steaming or soaking the wood. The crosse may be any length, but cannot exceed 1 foot (30.5 cm.) in width. A thong is run from the tip of the bent end to a point on the shaft (2 or 3 feet (60 to 90 cm.) from the base. Attached to this roughly triangular area is a loose webbing of rawhide or gut, with the mesh woven close enough not to cut the ball. The mesh on a modern crosse cannot form a pocket so deep as to make it difficult for an opponent to dislodge the ball. A recent introduction is the molded-head stick, with a plastic head attached to a metal shaft (see Fig. 4). The ball must be of rubber sponge, 3 to 5 ounces in weight (ca. 150 g.) and 7 to 8 inches (18 to 20 cm.) in diameter.

Ten players from each team. Playing fields vary from 60 to 70 yards (55–64 m.) in width, and as generally 110 yards (100 m.) in length. The two goals face each other at 50 yards (50 m.) apart. The object of the modern game is to score as often as possible during the playing time. Each game is divided into four periods of 15 minutes each. Speed characterizes the action. While protection from rough action is provided, padding and defensive equipment are held to a minimum to allow the most speed and agility during play.

In many respects the lacrosse played today by women is more similar to the original game as played by Native Americans. The women's game began around 1900 in England. It was brought to America by women sports instructors soon after. By 1912 Sargent Colburn of Boston and Sweet Briar in Virginia had active teams. Whereas men play four quarters and have no limits on substitutions as well as clearly bounded fields, the women play for two periods with no substitution limits and have an unbounded playing field. This "open" game has few rules, continuous flow, and players often take the ball wide or deep to achieve tactical advantage. The main variation from the original sport (and men's lacrosse) is that women's lacrosse, players are not allowed body contact, nor can they play "their sticks against the bodies of their opponents.

Traditional Lacrosse Today

Those who know lacrosse as a game seldom understand how integral it is to each of the cultures of the Six Nations (the Five Nations plus the Tuscarora tribe) and to others who participate in the competition or ritual. Lacrosse plays a major role in the life of these people. This is the case to this day, in addition to being one of the "healing sports." The persons to be healed does not compete. But a game held in his/her honor brings vitality back to the spirit and heals the body. Symbolic magic may be the label given by anthropologists, but the results can provide the gift of life to an ill person. Not only is individual prowess demonstrated in these modern matches, but culture and identity is reinforced. The game is "carved out lacrosse," says Oren R. Lyons (Jo-Quigs-Ho’ Onondaga Nation), "the Six Nations would be a deadened and dried and blown away" (personal communication, 1985).

In this year's game reports that an Iroquois Nation lacrosse team has been formed to participate in international competitions, since the most vigorous players of lacrosse may well be the members of the Six Nations (see Eymun 1964). When these teams compete, the action "leaves blood on the floor."

Functions in Antiquity

Various authors (Converse 1908; Speck 1945, 1949) have described the political and social purposes served by the lacrosse competitions which were held between members of the Five Nations, as well as with other nearby cultures. The Five Nations occupied territory in what is now south central New York State. Speck also researched the ritual and dramatic aspects of this "ritual sport" (1949:117–119), and Wallace points out that prior to the death of the Seneca prophet Haud- Some Lake, his people held a "game of lacrosse in his honor" (1972:310). This seems to have been an attempt to deal with his depressed mental state rather than his physical health. Among many people of the eastern Woodland tribes, a single object, such as a smoking pipe, can have a number of conceptual transformations. The lacrosse stick appears to have been referred to as "shovel-head" or as a "tipped head chisel" (Curtin 1921:37); Wolff (1977:20–21). This may relate to the wooden ball-headed war clubs also used among the cultures of this area (Fig. 5). In these clubs the ball, which is positioned at right angles to the shaft like the crosse of a lacrosse crosse, is generally curved with a face to represent a head (Becker 1950). Conceptually the ball/head flies off the handle to strike the enemy. In addition, in Seneca folklore the use of human heads as lacrosse balls must be connected to the idea of a "flying head" and heads in general as a gift of life to an ill person. No such transformation in the minds of the Seneca from the idea of a ball-headed war club. The lacrosse stick (see Fig. 3a), and explains much of the symbolism that Wolff has mentioned, getting lacrosse to warfare (1977:21).

Insights into Native American Political Organization

Studies of the Lenape of south-eastern Pennsylvania, their neighbors across the Delaware, New Jersey, and the Muscoe of the Upper Delaware River drainage reveal no evidence of their participation in lacrosse or any such related team sport. The few parts notes in the ethnographic literature as relating to these people only refer to highly individualized competitions (two people), to group activities quite distinct from team sports such as lacrosse.

It appears to have been played only by members of cultures where village clusters existed, and no longer or have succeeded those of the foraging Lenape. The political interrelationships among the Five Nations,
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where the sport has always been best known, as well as among the various members of the Huron-Neutrual league, were strengthened or reaffirmed through their athletic competition (Wolff 1977). The hard fought games themselves served as a 'peaceful' means by which members of the individual teams, whether kin groups or nations, could vent their personal or group hostilities against their athletic 'foes,' while maintaining their political alliances. These violent competitions, in which broken bones were common and death not at all infrequent (Converse 1968:145–148), provided a structured and formalized pattern of aggression which held the potential for damage to a minimum. The solidarity built up among the competitors helped to create a larger group or unit that acted as a single political force. Together, they could withstand assault from without or launch raids into the territories of people not in their league, in an athletic as well as political sense. A variation of this form of political affiliation and interaction also must have existed among the proto-states and states of Mesoamerica (see Jones's article in this issue), serving to cement alliances and facilitate interactions.

Not surprisingly the Seneca, the westernmost of the Five Nations, seem to have been the most active of the people involved in early lacrosse competition, for they were the "keepers of the western door." From this position they met the threat of peoples from the northwest and southwest and led the attacks on their many foes, such as the Susquehannock. At home their physical and strategic skills were honed with the game of lacrosse.

The smaller groups of Lenape, Munsee, and people like them could not compete in these athletic or military activities except in a limited way (Beecher 1983). With sparse populations, peoples such as the Lenape were concerned with searching for the basic resources needed for survival and with ways to accommodate their more powerful neighbors. Working as individuals, linked to others only by kinship, the Lenape made their way in the world without the complex sporting activities needed by and characteristic of people such as those united into the Five Nations Confederacy.

Team competition is one of the legacies of these Native Americans, often especially noted in revising our heritage. From lacrosse to polio-jok in Central America, the larger indigenous American societies reaffirm their identity by fielding teams to compete against people from another cultural group. Ancient Greek athletic events generally were individual competitions, while ancient American sports quite often were team activities.

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