LACROSSE
AND THE CAYUGA THUNDER RITE

By FRANCES EYMAN

Lacrosse, the great combative team sport among Indians of eastern North America, is today the national sport of Canada and is a popular collegiate game in the United States and Great Britain. French Canadians began to play the Iroquois form of stick-ball before 1750. Our name for the game comes from their term for the ball-stick, in Iroquois style, *la crosse*, so called because of its resemblance to a bishop’s crosier, his symbolic shepherd’s crook. Bagataway is also a rarely used name for the game, from its Ojibwa name, *Paugadewewi*.

As Lacrosse has grown in popularity, gradual changes have been made in rules and equipment. The modern sport as played by Americans and Europeans is somewhat different from the original Iroquois version of the game from which it was derived. It has become less violent and some details have been adopted from European games. After the Revolution, the Mohawk* of Quebec continued to play their native game, but only as a pastime, discarding its religious associations. French Canadians began its transformation into an international game. It finally spread to English Canadians, becoming their national sport in 1859. Official status resulted in rapid reorganization and standardization. Meanwhile, the pagan Iroquois communities have kept up to date on all the new developments and frequently meet white teams in formal matches played by the modern rule book. Yet among themselves they have still maintained the original forms of the game and have preserved its old ceremonial associations.

Still another form of lacrosse is played by American women. This is of recent origin and has been reintroduced from Great Britain. Its crosses are imported from England. It has retained the unlimited field of the Indian game, and it differs in many details from white and Indian men’s games.

The Seneca or Cayuga player from a Longhouse (“pagan”) family actually knows three different forms of lacrosse, and he has an intense interest in ancient styles of play. When he and his fellows meet a white team, they play a hard, fast, running game according to the rules of the Official Handbook. When the play is between Indian teams, the game goes by a different set of rules, and is tougher, with more long throws and passes, more body contact, and with many blocks that are defined as fouls in the Official Handbook. In the Indian game, a player may charge, shoulder, tackle, trip, or ram an opponent; he can even strike with the crosse provided that it is gripped in both hands. He may actually use the crosse to lift a running man off the ground and clamp him on his head; thus a broken collarbone is a frequent accident in the Indian game. Such lacrosse is still ritual combat, a ceremonial substitute for warfare. Finally, the conservative Indian also plays a primitive form of the game as part of religious ceremonies. In these games there are few rules, few players, little violence, and much emphasis on skill and speed. The game as a rite symbolizes conflict between life and death, good and evil, hope and despair. It also represents warfare between the thunderers and their eternal enemies, the under-earth deities.

A great player knows all three games almost by instinct. He offers us insights into the history of lacrosse, and therefore into the general nature of games and of ritual conflict. What we know of the grand drama of the ball-play comes from a few of these skilled amateurs.

As the game has evolved, ball-sticks or crosses have gradually changed. They form a continuous series from ancient Indian forms to those sold in sporting-goods stores today. The beat of our standard crosses for men are made by the Mohawk of Quebec and New York. Indians are especially aware of changes in the game, and recognize different types of crosses as representing earlier stages in the ball-play, the changes in the form of the crosse being related to changes in the game. The history of lacrosse games has been little studied, and the forms of the sticks, which varied from tribe to tribe and from period

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*The Five Nations or tribes of the Iroquois were the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. They became the Six Nations with the entry of the Tuscarora into their League in 1720.*

Three Cayuga crosses from Grand River, Ontario. The one on the left, made before 1845, is from the early stage of lacrosse prior to changes caused by white players. The central specimen, made before 1910, is for a left-handed player. It represents a transitional stage in the game, intermediate between the aboriginal form and the modern sport. The one on the right, made in 1932, is adapted to today’s official game.
to period, are poorly recorded. In my attempts to understand and interpret different kinds of crosses, I have found the traditional knowledge of older Indian players essential. Equally critical sources of data are older documented specimens, crosses of known date and place. Unfortunately most of the old sticks in museum collections bear little record.

The University Museum has a set of three from the Cayuga of Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, which are noteworthy for their documentation. Used by three generations of the same family, they span a century in the history of the game. The oldest is of considerable artistic merit. They were collected by Frank G. Speck from the Cayuga ritual leader Alexander T. General, who bears the venerable title Deskaheh as a chief of the League of the Iroquois. They were given to us by Samuel W. Fernberger.

The oldest specimen was used by Deskaheh's grandfather, who died in 1845. The Cayuga ascribe this stick to the "old game," played prior to 1860. In this stage of lacrosse, the Cayuga played only with Indian teams, no official handbook of lacrosse was yet known, and guards had not yet appeared on Cayuga ball-sticks. This cross is exceptional for its carving and for the refinement with which it was made, as well as for its documentation. Therefore, I should point out those details which place it in the early stage of the game, when juggling skills and agility were so important in Indian stick-ball.

Like our later crosses, it was carved from hickory. Its curve is very close to that of the ecclesiastical crosier. It is canted with a slightly twisted strip of rawhide or babiche, apparently from calfskin. The wood is old, smooth, and unpainted, carved in low but bold relief. The tip of the crosier is in the form of the head of a dog.

with the outermost string of the web coming out of a hole at the center of its mouth. The nose of the animal projects slightly beyond the edge of the web, forming a slight hook which might catch in the web of another crosier. Other Iroquois crosses which are equally old have the outermost string of the web tied into a groove around the tip of the crosier, leaving a small hook of about the same size projecting beyond the outermost string. Our specimen with its carved decoration and drilled string-hole is the most refined of all the old ones. Its outline, net-form, and other functional details are like those of other ancient Iroquois crosses. Its decoration is exceptional.

The animal head probably had symbolic and magical meaning—the stick in pursuit of the ball like a coursing hound. At the butt end of the handle, a human hand grasps a ball, perhaps with multiple significance. The ball may not be touched with the hand, but only with the crosier; possibly the crosier is here represented holding the ball as securely as though in the hand. The ball-in-hand was also a favorite motif for the ball-headed war club of ancient times, and this design may refer to the ritualized warfare acted out in the game. Two clasped hands are carved into the grip; these probably symbolize the friendly nature of ball-play conflict, in contrast to the game's underlying allegorical warfare. The rest of the grip is decorated with delicate geometrical chip-carving. Chip-carving was a favorite technique of American wood carvers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and is well known on old Iroquois objects.

The rawhide net was stretched within the crosier to form a flat web, not so taut as the strings of a tennis racket, but without any sag or pocket. The outermost string is in the same plane as the rest of the net. The flat web made for a more difficult game than do the deeply pocketed crosses of the modern game; cradling the ball on the web was one of the demanding skills of the old game.

The crosier was made by carving the stick to form while green, the tip being left about two feet longer than it would be when finished. This extra length was then bent to shape in a free curve, with its end lashed against the handle while the wood dried. Then the surplus was cut away to form the open crosier, the carving was finished and the thong holes bored, and the net was woven in place. The crosiers of the later crosses were shaped in a form.

The side of the crosier rising above the plane of the net makes a wall on each crosier. On the oldest stick, it has a thick D-shaped cross section, with its flat face almost perpendicular to the plane of the web. It forms a very low wall, of little use for holding the ball. The curved tip is a thin almond shape in section and forms an edge of about ten degrees with the web.

The second crosier of our set is one of a transitional stage, intermediate between old and new
types; it was used by Deshakeh's father, Isaac General, who died in 1910 at the age of 65. It is for a left-hander, but it has a flat web, for a part of the wall of the crook has a thin D-shaped section, forming a higher margin which would help in restraining the ball. Three guard strings at the outer edge of the net also rise above the plane of the web to form an elementary pocket. At the flattened tip of the crosse, the wall is at a very acute angle to the net, so that it might serve as a scoop. However, it is not as low as that of the modern type, and the web has no sag, all of the pocket-like effect being due to the higher wall and the guard strings. This is a large stick, four feet ten inches long, with a ten-inch-wide crook and a nineteen-inch handle. It meets the standards of the Official Handbook of 1888.

Cayuga believe that this was their typical crosse from 1860 to 1890, the stage which they call the "middle game." The ball was of soft rubber.

The most recent crosse was made by Jeremiah Aaron for Deshakeh in 1932 for use in a ritual game. It represents the modern Cayuga style rather than a standard Canadian crosse, but it meets the regulations of our Official Handbook. It is shorter than earlier Cayuga sticks, and shorter than many modern ones, being only three feet five inches long, with a crook six and one-half inches wide at the thickest part of the bar. The wall is a sloped triangle in section, and the crosse has a shovel-like form. The web is formed of less twisted strings of oil-tanned commercial leather crossed by rawhide, and it is pressed down and molded into a section of a cone. Three guard strings and the sloped wall blend into the contours of the web, which is much thinned and flattened tip, so that the crosse is typical of the scoops used in the modern white man's game. It was designed for use with a hard elastic rubber ball in the "new game," although it was actually used in the conservative ritual of the Longhouse.

Development of a pocket and addition of guard strings came with spreading popularity of the game among longhouses and accepted international rules and welcomed matches with any white teams. These modifications began a long time ago, and there are many other unrecorded changes in the history of the game. Guard strings have been required by the Official Handbook since at least 1880. They are intended to stop the ball from being carried over a crosse with the hook of another, an accident which was not considered a foul in the Indian games.

On a guarded crosse, several extra strings are added to the web, each one of them covering any slight projection of the tip.

Absence of guards is the most conspicuous feature of an early crosse. When guards first appeared, they were not interwoven into the rest of the web, but later were a notable feature. It is later a symbol of the battle between life and death being waged within the patient. Following such a dream, a lacrosse game was held, the wicker frame of the crosse, which normally has a depth equal to the diameter of the ball.

Old croses were more like a tennis racket, with a wicker frame, and the wickercraft was used in the ball-court game of jai alai or pelota. It is possible that lacrosse has even been influenced or modified by pelota. This may be one reason for the evolution of the crosse in the direction of the pelota cesta or basket. Other innovations in modern men's lacrosse have apparently been borrowed from other sports—the modern goal from ice hockey, the bounded field from one of the European court games. All of the standard innovations have been accepted by Indian players, but have not been admitted into their ritual games.

The conservative Iroquois man plays lacrosse as a religious activity. Outlines of the Cayuga games which follow are based on the observations of the late Frank G. Spock, who studied the rites of the Sour Spring Longhouse, and upon those records of the London Museum. The Seneca, was formerly married to a Cayuga ballplayer at Sour Spring. Ritual games of other Longhouses probably differ in detail, but these have been little studied. The Cayuga play lacrosse during two different ceremonies.

The Cayuga Thunder Ritual is held in the spring and summer when rain is needed. An outdoor fire serves as an altar of tobacco, with speeches and prayers. Players have prepared for the game by fasting, purging, and treatment with herbal medicines. Each team has seven players, one team made up of older men from one moiety, the other of younger men from the other moiety. Thus the game is thought of as being played by generations. There are no boundaries except the goals; there are no out-of-bounds. Each goal is a pair of sticks seven paces apart, and a goal is scored by carrying or throwing the ball beyond this line. The ball is centered at the beginning by throwing it up, and it is grasped for with the crosses as it falls; it must not be touched by hand or foot. The emphasis is all on skill and speed, with few blocks and little violence. Here one may see the fleet runner showing off his skill, juggling the ball on the net of his cross. He always wears the wild form of the ball. The more skill,erve, and speed, the better the player and the more reason for the gods to be pleased. Often the game is played for a single point, sometimes for two or three. The goal is achieved by mere winning of little consequence. The losing team, however, provides a meal for the winners, and the two teams break their own fast at this dinner except by invitation of the winners.

Of a very different nature were some great...