

The historical origins of lacrosse game



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History of Lacrosse

What is the history of lacrosse? It is a topic that holds interesting for me in two respects. First, I enjoy all types of history, so learning the who's and what's of the sport is interesting to me. Second, I play lacrosse and knowing who and how the sport was developed would help and interest me.

How the game of lacrosse was played. What they used to play with, the types of sticks and balls. Rules used to play, team size, and the basic aspects of the game. The differences between the game of old and the one I play. These are some of the things I would like to know more about.

The war aspect of the game is really interesting. How the aspects of war were incorporated into the game, and why, plus the rituals performed, were all closely interconnected.

Knowing these facts and accounts of lacrosse, before it was changed will help me to understand the game I love. It will also help me to understand those who came before me and passed the game on to me. Plus it will allow me to better understand a people whose ways have been removed and in instances put to an end.

I will be showing, to the best of my ability, an objective view of this history. But some of the information I used was not as objective, so in using their info I tamed down the language, but some of the information is still seemingly biased, but in my points and opinions I will be more objective.

Lacrosse is the oldest team sport played in North America by anyone. But beyond that it was an influential part of a society now mostly defunct. The

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history of lacrosse is rich in many ways, in its traditions, rituals, and ceremonies.

The game of lacrosse had many styles of play based on the area the tribe was located, it also had different names, all meaning about the same. Their sticks were how they played but more importantly it was their way of life. This was true because lacrosse trained the braves for many things, as well as solved their disputes.

The origin of lacrosse is an obscure one. There are a few ideas of how and where the game originated but no one knows. But the game of lacrosse was the American Indians own, and no others. The American Indians of the northeast and the now central states played lacrosse. There is, however, a similarity between lacrosse and the most popular ball game played by the Norse, called knattleiker. Knattleiker was played in Iceland around 874 BC, and was frequently mentioned in Icelandic sagas, but never in great detail, so an idea of the rules and the game itself can only be obtained from recorded incidents and episodes. (Boyd 14) Professor Hertzberg suggested the possible connection between the two, in that the Norse introduced knattleiker to the Indian tribes of the northeast coast of America, where it then spread inland (Boyd 14). The contact between the American Indians and the Norse occurring when the Norse explored the New World and made camps in Canada and the northeast US. This though is uncertain, where Indian games of lacrosse were witnessed and so is certain.

The early data on lacrosse is from missionaries and English explorers, and is scant and often conflicting. But they agree on one thing, there were three

different forms of lacrosse. They were the southeast, Great Lakes, and the Iroquoian (Vennum 2).

Thomas Vennum JR described the three types.

The southeastern game was a double sticked version of the game. A two and a half foot stick is held in each hand, and a soft, small deerskin ball is held between the two. This differs from today's game, in that only one stick is used, and it is about 3 feet long, plus an inch or two, depending on the player's preference.

The Great Lake version, players used a single three-ft. stick. The stick terminates in a round, closed pocket about three to four inches in diameter, hardly larger than the ball, which was made of wood, charred and scraped to shape. The American Indians would put a chunk of wood on a fire and let the outer portions char slightly; they would then scrape and form the wood into a ball. This differs from today's game, where a hard rubber ball is used.

The Iroquoian or northeastern style, is the forerunner of modern sticks. In that this stick was the model for today's sticks. Their sticks were the longest, more than three feet; the shaft ended in a crook and a large, flat triangular surface of webbing extending as much as two-thirds of the length of the stick. Today's sticks are still about the same length, instead of the stick ending in a crook, the head is plastic and screwed onto the shaft. The head is still covered by netting; just it is not as big or far-reaching as on the old sticks.

The type of sticks used in lacrosse depended upon which style of play you came from. Once again the Great Lake style had two small sticks, one in

each hand, while the southeast and Iroquois had only one larger stick. While this differed greatly, the importance of the stick did not.

Sticks were very important to the American Indians. Sticks were a symbol of triumph for the Native American culture. Rick Hill Sr., Professor of Native American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo says that in design lacrosse sticks are descendants of war clubs (Conover 33). The sticks were elaborately carved on the butts and handles. The sticks were so important, then and now, to the players that they requested that they be buried with their sticks next to them (Vennum 2).

Lacrosse's origins are rooted in legend, and are surrounded with ceremony. The Indians believed that the creator gave lacrosse to them in the past. For the Indians in ancient days, today's as well; a lacrosse game was a ceremonial replay of the creation story and the struggle between good and evil that ensued (Conover 32). So it was then an understandably important role in Indian culture. Lacrosse was the creator's gift, and it was an important part of the American Indians lives. This is why lacrosse proved to be so important. For these reasons, game outcome and team selection were believed to be supernaturally controlled. Since the creator gave them the game, he also decides who plays and wins the game.

Games were large affairs, played by tribes. Hundreds of braves played on each side, over a thousand occasionally. They played on a large open space or prairie, with no out-of-bounds, and play then ranged in all directions. There were two goals, between 500 yards and half a mile apart usually, but sometimes they were miles apart. (Boyd 17)

Goals ranged in types, a single pole, tree, or rock. Or two goal posts were used where hitting the single " post" or shooting between the two posts resulted in a goal, or one point. Games were reported to reach a hundred points or more on occasion. Games often lasted days, ending at sundown and beginning at sunup (Conover 32).

Equipment was, and still is, prepared ritually for games by conjurers. Games were very important so they were very serious, regardless of the reason for it. Between these factors and the fact that the preparation and rituals required of the players were the same as those practiced before going on the warpath (Vennum 3).

Games were held for many reasons. The whole community often became involved with games for many reasons as well. The games were played for fun, and so betting was a major part of the game for everyone. Furs, beadwork, wives, and children were all bet on the outcome of games (Vennum 3). But this is debatable. It is thought by some that American Indians only learned how to bet from Europeans, that and they had a stronger sense of family, and so would not bet their wives or children, but these are just two sides of the debate. Games were held for other reasons also. They were used as training for war. The large numbers of players with seemingly no rules simulated combat. Many observers have been quoted on the games aspects,

In these desperate struggles for the ball, when hundreds are running together and leaping actually over each others heads, and darting between their adversaries legs, tripping and throwing and fouling each other in every

possible manner, and every voice raised to the highest key in shrill yelps and barks, there are a rapid succession of feats and of incidents that astonish and amuse far beyond the conception of anyone who has not had the great luck to see them (Boyd15).

Another observer is quoted as saying, " Almost everything short of murder is allowable"(Conover 32). So the games were rough, giving the braves good fighting skills. Plus the long duration of games gave them an increased endurance. The Indians used this warlike appearance to their advantage. Boyd writes of one account,

In 1763, during Pontiac's Rebellion, an attack on Ft. Michillmacknic was disguised as a lacrosse game. When the inhabitants and soldiers were completely enthralled by the game the ball was thrown into the fort and the soldiers interested in seeing the game continue opened the gates and let the Indians in. When the Indians got in they dropped their sticks and pulled out their weapons and attacked the inhabitants.

This account shows how the fierce playing style the American Indians used would be training for war. It was so wild and new to the settlers they were mesmerized and so wanted the game to continue, allowing the American Indians to accomplish their attack. Games were also held to end territorial disputes, but this did not always turn out peaceful. In 1790 a Creek vs. Choctaw game was held to determine rights to a beaver pond. When the Creeks were declared the winners a violent battle ensued. Most matches ended peacefully though.

On occasion a game was set up to honor another tribe. Conover describes account of this kind,

In 1794 after the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution whites were once again threatening Indian lands in what is now Ohio and New York. Chief Joseph Brant of the Mohawks, who sided with the British during the Revolution, was negotiating for land in Canada.

The site offered by the British was unacceptable and would have separated them from the rest of the Six Nations, to which the Mohawks belonged. The Seneca, also members, agreed that the site was unacceptable and so intervened, getting the Mohawks a better site. Brant then set up a ceremonial lacrosse game to celebrate the Seneca help.

Lacrosse was one of the things that helped keep the Six Nations together in the forthcoming years that would be difficult. They used lacrosse, a stable part of their society, to keep that same society from collapsing.

Problems with lacrosse only started when the whites interfered. Because Indians had to charge money to travel to international matches, they were labeled as “professionals” and so banned from International competition, reserved for “amateurs”(Vennum 3). This came during a time of American Indian resentment, and for some hatred. This barrier held until 1980 when the Iroquois Nationals formed and broke this barrier.

Many aspects started that brought negative thought. Wagering on games which had always been an integral part to the community's involvement. When betting and violence saw an increase; lacrosse was looked upon

negatively by whites. This was, however, the traditional Indian culture eroding, not the sport itself. This betting and violence sparked opposition to lacrosse from government officials and missionaries. The betting was also believed to have an impoverishing effect on the Indians. Plus the games were felt to interfere with church attendance. The last straw though was in 1900 when the Oklahoma Choctaw attached lead weights to their sticks to use as skull-crackers.

The game was then banned. In 1950 the Great Lakes style of lacrosse died out, but the Iroquois and southeast still played their own styles and games.

Lacrosse got its name from a Jesuit missionary-Jean de Bre`beuf. Who called it crosse. This was derived from the pastoral staff a bishop uses, called a crosier, so thus-la crosse. It was known as la crosse until only recently, when it became one word. (Scott 7) This change occurred due to an “Americanization” of the word during a time when American English took more of a precedence than its French Predecessor.

The Indians however named it differently, for different aspects of the game. The Onondaga name described the technique, Dehuntshigwa`es, or, “men hit a rounded object.” In the southeast, the games aspect of war was used, Baggataway, or, “little brother of war”(Boyd 18).

Non-Indians did not start playing lacrosse until the mid-19th century. At first the French and English settlers were both startled and horrified by the game. In 1856 the first non-Indian team was formed in Montreal, Canada. They adopted the Mohawk game and “civilized” it by a new set of rules and organized it into amateur clubs. Thus ruling out the Indians since they were

still labeled as Professionals. The game has grown over the years and is the fastest growing sport in the world.

The non-Indian women's field game of lacrosse is the closest to how the Indians originally played the game. It retains the wooden sticks, although now plastic ones are becoming more popular, lacking the protective gear and sidelines of the men's game, and tends towards mass attack rather than positions and offsides (Vennum 2).

The history of lacrosse has been rich and diverse. It has had many forms and peoples playing it.

With possible origins from Iceland, and names differing by language and observation of the sport. Between men and women it has been available. Lacrosse has helped the Indian culture, and is an integral part of that same culture.

Through this paper I learned many new things, where the name lacrosse came from, how American Indians played, plus many more aspects too numerous to list. I can use this new found information to better myself and those around me so no more of the history is lost, and that history does not repeat itself I learned how the Indians used to play the game of lacrosse, and how it differs to the sport I love to play, just as they did. I think more players need to realize the past that has given them such a great sport and just learn about it and thank those who came before them, for their efforts to pass on this sport called Baggataway, or " little brother of war."