

Lacrosse

Political Organization in North America as Reflected in Athletic Competition

MARSHALL JOSEPH
BECKER

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 *bagataway* (from Ojibwa *pagaadowewin*), 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 with a bent or hooked end (see Fig. 2a, right), which the Europeans 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



1
Cherokee ball players from Wolfstown, North Carolina, 1888 (see Culin 1907, opp. p. 586).

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 Wulff (1977:16) notes that an Abbe Ferland and later a Monsieur La Honton (1703) provided complementary descriptions of these contests (see Converse 1908:145).

The Game: Then and Now

The stick or crosse used to play bagataway, according to the earliest descriptions, was generally of heavy hickory, with tight or taut webbing. The rawhide laces of this network may have helped to form or maintain the bend in the stick. This tension in the webbing (which was

greater than that of the modern crosse) meant 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 size was 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 population 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



2 The crosse on the right was made sometime prior to 1845, before changes to the game and equipment were instituted by American and European players (L. 135 cm.; W. of crook 23.4 cm.). The lefthand example, made in 1932, represents the modern wooden lacrosse stick (L. 103.7 cm.; W. across pocket 16.7 cm.), while the middle one, made before 1910, illustrates a transitional stage between the other two (it also was designed for a lefthanded player; L. 146.3 cm.). Details of the crosse on the right can be seen in Fig. 3a,b. All three crosses are from the Cayuga of Six Nations Reserve, Grand River, Ontario, and are in the collection of The University Museum.

game also seems to have varied, being decided by the teams before play. This decision often resulted in the game continuing for days, until the needed number of goals had been reached by one team. In these cases play would be ended at dark, but would begin anew the following morning. The concept of limited periods of play appears to have been put into practice only in the early 19th century.

The playing season for the original game began in the spring and lasted until harvest time, corresponding with the period when most of the members of these tribes would have been resident within or nearby their fortified villages. Quite probably the winter season, when the hunting of deer and other game was critical, was also the period of conducting raids against people with whom these athletes did not play bagatway.

By 1800 a number of changes had taken place, leading the sport to-

ward its modern form. The number of players dropped from the hundreds down to as few as a dozen on each team, although larger numbers were still participating in inter-village competitions. The size of the playing field decreased, and all the equipment began to approach its present form. Crosses of lighter wood generally were preferred to the heavy hickory stick.

"Rule-book Lacrosse"

Beginning about 1840, European immigrants became addicted to lacrosse, and it is now the national summer sport in Canada. Rule books were printed, and by 1880 every piece of equipment was commercially available (McNaught 1880). (The Lacrosse Emporium on West King Street in Toronto offered good sticks at under \$1.00 each, but single-netted real "Gibson" Grand River Sticks sold for up to \$1.75.) Since the 1880s, international com-

3a The ball-in-hand motif at the butt end of this crosse (see Fig. 2, right) is reminiscent of ritual ball-headed war clubs also made by Five Nations peoples. Farther down along the shaft are carved two clasped hands.



3b The crook tip of the crosse has been carved in the form of a dog's head.



4 A modern lacrosse stick may have a molded plastic head on a metal shaft.



5 Wooden ball-headed ritual club from the Eastern Woodlands (from the collection of the Horniman Museum, London). The club has wampum bead and bone inlays, and the butt end is carved to represent an animal head (L. 60.0 cm.).

petitions have been held, and lacrosse was an early addition during the development of the modern Olympic games.

The present-day crosse is a short hickory 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 of 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 entrap 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 sponge rubber, 5 to 5¼ ounces in weight (ca. 150 g.) and 7¾ to 8 inches (9.70 to 10.30 cm.) in diameter.

Ten players form each team. Playing fields now vary from 60 to 70 yards (55–64 m.) in width, and are generally 110 yards (100 m.) in length. The two goals face each other at 80 yards (73 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 essential, 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 and was brought to America by women sports instructors soon after. By 1912 Sargent College in Boston and Sweet Briar in Virginia had active teams. Whereas men play four quarters and have numerous substitutions as well as clearly bounded fields, the women play for two periods with no substitutions (except for serious injury), 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 in women's lacrosse, players are not allowed body contact, nor can they use 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 to this day, in addition to being one of the "healing sports." The person to be healed does not compete, but a game held in his/her honor brings vitality back to the spirit and heals the body. Sympathetic 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 cultural identity is reaffirmed. "Without lacrosse," says Oren R. Lyons (Jo-Ag-Quis-Ho, Onondaga Nation), "the Six Nations would have withered and dried and blown away" (personal communication, 1985).

This year Lyons 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 Eyman 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 mentions the medicinal (curative) aspects of this "ritual" sport (1949:117–119), and Wallace points out that prior to the

death of the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake, his people held "a game of lacrosse in his honor" (1972:319). 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 a "ball club" or as a "netted ball club" (Curtin 1921:379; Wulff 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 crook of a lacrosse stick, is generally carved with a face to represent a head (Becker 1980). 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 part of the game. This suggests a transformation in the minds of the Seneca from the idea of a ball-headed ("war") club to a lacrosse stick (see Fig. 3a), and explains much of the symbolism that Wulff has suggested as relating lacrosse to warfare (1977:21).

Insights into Native American Political Organization

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

Lacrosse appears to have been played only by members of cultures where village clusters existed, and where population densities exceeded those of the foraging Lenape. The political interrelationships among the Five Nations,

“These violent competitions . . . provided a structured and formalized pattern of aggression . . .”

where the sport has always been best known, as well as among the various members of the Huron-Neutral league, were strengthened or reaffirmed through their athletic competition (Wulff 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 1908:145–146), 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 (Becker 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 least often noted in reviewing our heritage. From lacrosse to *pok-tapok* 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. 21

Selected Readings

Becker, Marshall Joseph
1980

“A Ball Headed Club from the Eastern Woodlands in the Collections of the Horniman Museum, London, England.” *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* 50(1&2):1–8.

1983

“The Boundary between the Lenape and the Munsee: The Forks of Delaware as a Buffer Zone.” *Man in the Northeast* 26(Fall):1–20.

Converse, Harriet Maxwell
1908

Myths and Legends of the New York State Iroquois. New York State Museum Bulletin No. 125. Albany.

Culin, Stewart
1975

Games of the North American Indians. (Reprint of the 24th Annual Report of the US Bureau of American Ethnology; 1907.) New York: Dover Publications.

Curtin, Jeremiah
1921

Seneca Indian Myths. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Eisen, George
1977

“Voyageurs, Black Robes, Saints, and Indians.” *Ethnohistory* 24:191–205.

Eyman, A. Frances
1964

“Lacrosse and the Cayuga Thunder Rite.” *Expedition* 6(4):14–19.

Kent, Barry
1983

Susquehanna’s People. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

La Hontan, Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce (baron de)
1703

New Voyages to North America (etc.). London: H. Bonwicke, T. Goodwin, et al.

McNaught, W. K.
1880

LaCrosse and How to Play It. Toronto: Rose-Belford Publishing Company.

Perrot, Nicholas
1911

“Memoir on the Manners, Customs, and Religion of the Savages of North America.” In *Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, Vol. 1, ed. Emma H. Blair. Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark.

Scott, Bob
1976

Lacrosse: Technique and Tradition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Smith, Karen Lynn
1975

The Role of Games, Sport, and Dance in Iroquois Life. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

Speck, Frank G.
1945

The Iroquois. Bulletin of the Cranbrook Institute of Science, Vol. 23.

1949

Midwinter Rites of the Cayuga Long House. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vellathottam, Thomas George
1972

A History of Lacrosse in Canada Prior to 1914. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

Wallace, Anthony F. C.
1972

The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca. New York: Vintage Books.

Weyand, Alexander M. and Milton R. Roberts
1965

The Lacrosse Story. Baltimore: H. & A. Herman.

Wulff, Roger L.
1977

“Lacrosse among the Seneca.” *The Indian Historian* 10(2):16–22.

Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks are due Oren R. Lyons for his observations on lacrosse among the Onondaga. His insights are deeply appreciated. Thanks also are due C. Lutterman and P. Resnick for aid in various aspects of this research.



Marshall Joseph Becker, at present a Senior Fellow in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, received all of his degrees from that institution. His studies of the Contact period Lenape (Delaware) show concern with integrating all aspects of anthropology. For relaxation he studies human skeletal populations from southern Italy.