

LACROSSE: INSPIRING FEATS

by Phyllis McIntosh





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To generations of Americans, baseball is “the national pastime.” And football is the all-American sport that keeps millions of fans glued to the television or cheering in stadiums every weekend during the fall. But in fact no sport is more thoroughly American than the stickball game of lacrosse.

Sometimes called the fastest game on two feet, lacrosse is a combination of soccer and hockey in which players use sticks with loose netting on one end to catch, carry, and pass a ball in an effort to hurl it into an opponent’s goal. Originated by Native Americans long before Europeans set foot in the New World, early versions of the game were part religious ritual and part military training for young tribesmen.

Today, it’s just plain fun for players of all ages, which has made it one of the fastest growing sports in the United States and increasingly worldwide. People in more than 30 countries on five continents now play organized lacrosse. Yet, inexplicably, the sport has not been recognized as an official sport in the Olympics since 1908—much to the annoyance of its legions of fans.

History of Lacrosse

Some version of lacrosse may have originated in Mexico and Central America as early as the 12th cen-

For lacrosse games in the 1600s, goal markers were often large rocks or trees spaced widely apart. This modern lacrosse goal is six feet wide and six feet tall, and the net is stretched seven feet behind the frame of the goal.

tury. By the time Europeans witnessed their first game in the 1600s, lacrosse was a favorite among at least 48 Native American tribes throughout the eastern half of North America. Many early contests took place on a grand scale, with as many as 1,000 men from different tribes or villages competing in games that lasted for two or three days. The goal markers, often large rocks or trees, could be up to several miles apart.

Native American players crafted lacrosse balls out of wood, baked clay, stone, or deerskin stuffed with hair. The first sticks were probably steamed and shaped into giant spoons for scooping the ball. Later versions, precursors of the modern lacrosse stick, had one end bent into a circle that was filled with netting made of deer sinew. Elaborate carvings, thought to bring players good luck, adorned many of the sticks. Some lacrosse men so valued their sticks that they even asked to be buried with them.

For Native Americans, lacrosse was far more than an athletic event. Surrounded by ceremony and rituals similar to preparations for battle, contests also



The rules of modern lacrosse, as it appears here, were written in 1867, setting the dimensions of the field and the goals and limiting the number of players per team.

had considerable spiritual significance. Games were played not just to develop strong young men and settle disputes among tribes but also to please the Creator and appeal for healing and other favors.

The names Native Americans conferred on the sport reflect its various roles in their cultures. The Cherokee, for example, emphasized the military aspect, calling the game “little brother of war.” Some players, such as the Iroquois, still refer to lacrosse as “the Creator’s game,” believing it is a gift from the Creator and is played “for the Creator.”

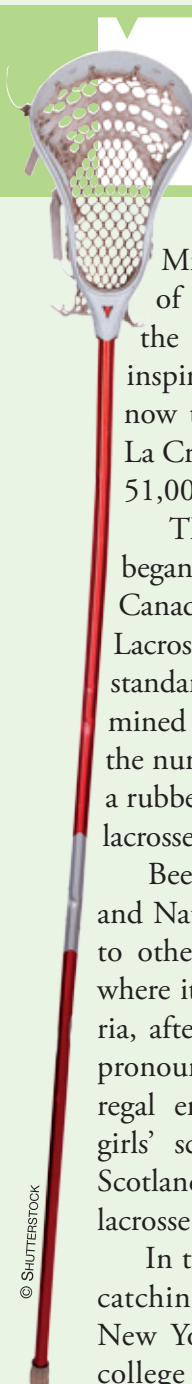
Despite their spiritual trappings, early lacrosse contests sometimes turned nasty. In the 1700s, a game between Creeks and Choctaws to determine rights to a beaver pond ended in a violent battle when the Creeks were declared winners. On one occasion in 1763, a Native American lacrosse game set the stage for an ambush of a British fort. Players from the Ottawa tribe invited troops from Fort Michilimackinac in what is now Michigan to watch

a game in celebration of the king’s birthday. As the competitors worked their way closer to the fort, they seized weapons their women were hiding under their shawls, stormed the fort, and massacred the occupants. According to some historians, lacrosse became increasingly violent as European expansion weakened Native American culture.

Birth of Modern Lacrosse

Europeans discovered lacrosse in the 1630s when a French missionary, Jean de Brebeuf, described a game he witnessed tribesmen playing in southern Ontario. He is often credited with naming the sport lacrosse, possibly because the stick resembled a bishop’s staff, or *crosier*. More likely, the name originated from the French term for field hockey, *le jeu de la crosse*. Although missionaries disapproved of the game, which traditionally involved wagering, it caught on among French colonists and by the 1800s had become quite popular.

The sport’s name was even given to an American city. In 1805, so the story goes, U.S. Army officer Zebulon Pike was leading an expedition up the



Depending on the player using it, a lacrosse stick can measure from about three feet to six feet in length. All sticks have a pocket of netting for catching, controlling, and throwing the ball.

Mississippi River when he came upon a group of young Sioux playing lacrosse. He named the region “Prairie La Crosse,” which in turn inspired the name of a city and county in what is now the state of Wisconsin. The modern city of La Crosse is a thriving community with more than 51,000 residents.

The sport of lacrosse as we know it today began in 1867, when Dr. William George Beers, a Canadian dentist who had founded the Montreal Lacrosse Club, developed a set of written rules that standardized the game. His regulations, which determined the dimensions of the field and goals, limited the number of players per team, and specified use of a rubber ball, earned him the title “father of modern lacrosse.”

Beers went on to organize a team of Canadian and Native American players to introduce the game to other countries of the British Commonwealth, where it was enthusiastically received. Queen Victoria, after witnessing an exhibition contest in 1876, pronounced the game “very pretty to watch.” This regal endorsement stirred interest among British girls’ schools, including St. Leonard’s School in Scotland, whose students played the first women’s lacrosse game in 1890.

In the United States, meanwhile, the sport was catching on at colleges and high schools. In 1877, New York University became the first American college to create a lacrosse team, playing its first match against nearby Manhattan College. Five years later, two New England prep schools, Phillips Academy in Massachusetts and Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, fielded the first high school teams. Women’s lacrosse, however, arrived in the United States as a British import when Rosabelle Sinclair of St. Leonard’s School in Scotland established the first successful women’s program at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore.

The state of Maryland and the Baltimore region in particular have long been associated with the



Lacrosse is played with a hard rubber ball about eight inches around.

growth of American lacrosse. Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore traditionally has been a powerhouse in collegiate competition, and the University of Maryland has dominated women’s college lacrosse. Baltimore is home to US Lacrosse, the governing body for the sport in the United States, as well as to the Lacrosse Museum and National Hall of Fame. The city also will host the men’s collegiate championship finals in both 2010 and 2011. In tribute to the sport’s popularity, in 2004 the Maryland legislature declared lacrosse the state’s official team sport. (Legislators had to specify *team* sport because Maryland already had a state sport even older than lacrosse—jousting.)

Lacrosse Basics

Part of the appeal of lacrosse is that it combines some of the best elements of other popular sports: the physical demands of American football, both individual and team defense as in basketball, and the fast action and attacking and defending of goals that occur in soccer and hockey. Because a lacrosse player’s speed and dexterity count more than weight, height, or sheer strength, players of all shapes and sizes can compete at some level.

Three types of lacrosse are played today:

- **Men’s field lacrosse.** This most common form of lacrosse is played on a field 110 yards long and



A lacrosse game begins with a face-off in which the ball is placed on the ground between the sticks of two opposing players at the center of the field. When the official blows the whistle, each player tries to gain control of the ball.

60 yards wide. Goals are set 80 yards apart, which allows a large playing area behind each goal, a design unique to lacrosse.

Basic equipment includes a hard rubber ball about eight inches round and a stick that, depending on the player, can measure from about three feet to six feet long. All sticks have a pocket of netting on the head for catching, controlling, and throwing the ball. Players can choose from dozens of models of sticks made of wood or synthetic material that vary in weight, head design, and the style in which the netting is strung.

Each team has ten players on the field at a time: a goalkeeper, three defensemen who defend the goal, three midfielders who cover the entire field playing both offense and defense, and three attackmen who are the primary offensive players. The offense tries to land the ball in the opponent's goal; the defense works to prevent the other team from scoring and to regain possession of the ball.

Play begins with a face-off, in which the ball is placed on the ground between the sticks of two opposing players at the center of the field. When the official blows the whistle, each player tries to gain control of the ball for his team. During play, the ball moves at high speed, and there is considerable

stick contact as well as what is called body checking. A player may deliberately check, or bump, an opponent from the front between the shoulders and waist if the opponent has the ball or is within five yards of it. To protect themselves, players wear helmets and masks, gloves, mouth guards, shoulder pads, and often arm pads and rib pads.

- **Box lacrosse.** Introduced in Canada in the 1930s to boost business for hockey arenas, this indoor version of lacrosse is played by six-man teams on hockey rinks where the ice has been removed or covered with artificial turf. The boards around the rink define the playing field, hence the “box.”

Because of its limited playing field, narrower goals, and a shot clock that requires a team to take a shot on goal within 30 seconds of gaining possession of the ball, box lacrosse is a rougher and faster-paced game than field lacrosse. As in ice hockey, goalies wear heavy protective gear, including massive chest protectors with attached armguards, large shin guards, and masks or helmets.

Soon after it was introduced, box lacrosse replaced field lacrosse as the most popular form of the sport in Canada. In the United States, its popularity has increased with formation of club level leagues in such cities as Baltimore and Philadelphia. Eleven indoor teams—seven American



A player launches the ball from his stick in an attempt to score a goal.



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and four Canadian—compete in the professional National Lacrosse League.

- **Women's lacrosse.** With rules significantly different from those of the men's game, women's lacrosse is thought to more closely resemble the original Native American sport. Rules prohibit most body contact. Consequently, players wear minimal protective gear—goggles, mouth guard, and sometimes thin gloves.

Each team has 12 players—three attackers, five midfielders, three defenders, and one goalie. Play begins not with a face-off but with a draw in which the ball is sandwiched between horizontal sticks held by two opposing players. When the whistle sounds, each player tries to push or fling the ball toward her teammates. The duration of the game is 60 minutes, same as in men's lacrosse, but the women's game is divided into two 30-minute halves instead of the men's 15-minute quarters.

With rules significantly different from those of the men's game, women's lacrosse is thought to more closely resemble the original Native American sport.

Loving Lacrosse at All Levels

America's first sport is rapidly becoming one of America's favorite participation sports, according to surveys by US Lacrosse. The number of Americans playing on organized teams doubled in just eight years, from 250,000 in 2001 to 500,000 in 2008. Kids as young as seven or eight start playing youth lacrosse, which is the fastest growing segment of the sport.

At the high school level, lacrosse is second only to bowling as the fastest growing sport. Organized high school lacrosse is now played in 40 states. Nearly 2,300 boys and girls programs have sprung up in the past decade.

At a time when colleges and universities are adding few new sports programs, lacrosse is the excep-

tion. It was the fastest growing intercollegiate sport over the past decade, and it's still on the upswing. Colleges launched 21 new varsity lacrosse programs in 2009, and 40 more are poised to begin in 2010 or 2011. College lacrosse is an increasingly popular spectator sport as well. The NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Lacrosse Championships now draw crowds of up to 50,000 for games played in professional football stadiums.

Many avid college and high school players continue to compete as adults in club lacrosse. There are more than a dozen adult men's club leagues, including the American Lacrosse League, which alone has more than 50 teams. Women compete in more than 70 post-collegiate clubs around the country.

Currently, there are two professional men's lacrosse leagues in North America: Major League Lacrosse, a six-team outdoor league based in Boston; and the 11-team indoor National Lacrosse League, which has been playing professional indoor lacrosse since 1987.



In a show of team spirit, lacrosse players celebrate a victory by raising their sticks in the air.



Lacrosse is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States, with kids as young as seven or eight signing up for youth lacrosse.

At the international level, both men's and women's lacrosse is governed by the newly formed Federation of International Lacrosse (FIL), which boasts 26 member nations, including the Native American Iroquois Nation. The FIL holds men's and women's world championships at both the senior and under-19 age levels every four years. World Indoor Lacrosse Championships also occur every four years.

Despite its phenomenal growth at every level, lacrosse continues to be shut out of the Olympics. It was included as a medal sport only in 1904 and 1908 and has not even been presented as a demonstration sport since 1948. Fans are using Internet social networking sites, such as Facebook, in an effort to collect a million votes in favor of making lacrosse an Olympic sport. They point out that much less popular sports, such as archery, badminton, and synchronized swimming, have official Olympic status.

The sport of lacrosse has had a remarkable journey over the centuries, from the days-long, 1,000-player contests of long ago to the organized leagues of today. Those who play it—whether young beginners, professional competitors, or Native Americans keeping their tradition alive—share a love for the game that has made lacrosse one of America's favorite sports for half a millennium.

Lacrosse Lingo

body check – using the body to hit an opposing ball carrier or while contesting an opponent for a loose ball. The hit must occur between the shoulders and waist.

clamping – quickly pushing the back of the stick down on the ball in an attempt to gain control of the ball during a face-off

clearing – an important defensive maneuver in which defending players run or pass the ball out of their goal area

cradling – turning the wrists and arms to keep the ball from falling out of the stick pocket while the player moves along the field

crosse – the stick used to catch, carry, and throw the ball

draw – a maneuver used to start play at the beginning of each half and after each goal in women's lacrosse. The ball is held between the horizontal sticks of two opposing players and flung into the air as the sticks are pulled away.

face-off – a maneuver used to put the ball in play at the start of each quarter or after each goal in men's lacrosse. Opposing players crouch down and vie for control of the ball, which is placed on the ground between their sticks.

ground ball – a loose ball on the playing field

pocket – the part of the head of the stick that is strung with netting to hold the ball



rake – a face-off move in which a player sweeps the ball to the side in an attempt to gain control of the ball

stick check – striking the stick against the stick of an opposing ball carrier in an attempt to dislodge the ball from the pocket

Websites of Interest

Iroquois Nationals

<http://iroquoisnationals.org>

The official website of the Iroquois Nationals, a team that competes internationally, this site explains the history of lacrosse and its importance in Native American culture.

Lacrosse Museum and Hall of Fame

www.uslacrosse.org/museum

This section of the US Lacrosse website features a virtual tour of the Lacrosse Museum in Baltimore and information about National Hall of Fame members listed alphabetically, by school, and by year elected.

US Lacrosse

www.uslacrosse.org

This website of US Lacrosse, the governing body for men's and women's lacrosse in the United States, contains a wealth of information about the history, rules, and players of the sport.

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The player in the center is cradling to maintain possession of the ball while she moves down the field.



Carrying on a Native American Tradition

THE IROQUOIS NATIONALS, a team of the Iroquois Confederacy, carries on a 500-year tradition of lacrosse among their people. With their membership in the Federation of International Lacrosse, the Iroquois are the only nation of indigenous peoples sanctioned to compete internationally in any sport.

The Nationals participate in the World Lacrosse Championships and the World Indoor Lacrosse Championships, where they have repeatedly placed among the top four competitors against such countries as the United States and Canada. Like other athletes, they have a partnership with a sports equipment manufacturer, Nike, Inc., which provides the team with uniforms, footwear, warm-up clothing, and casual sportswear.

The Nationals stress that to the Iroquois, lacrosse is more than a sport; it is part of their heritage and still considered “a gift to our people from the Creator.” The team website notes that “the first purpose of the game is spiritual.” Lacrosse is “a ‘medicine’ game because it promotes the health and strength of the Nation, ensuring a continuance of our tradition and an understanding of our ways.”

The Iroquois Confederacy represents Native Americans who once occupied extensive lands in the northeastern United States and eastern Canada. Today, more than 70,000 Iroquois live in 18 communities in the states of New York, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

JIM BROWN: All-American Athlete

IRONICALLY, the athlete many experts consider the best ever to play the game of lacrosse is far better known for excelling in American football. Jim Brown, widely regarded as the best running back in the history of the National Football League, played nine seasons with the Cleveland Browns. He also holds the distinction of being the only person inducted into halls of fame for pro football, college football, and lacrosse.

Brown was an All-Star lacrosse player for three years at Manhasset High School in New York and went on to excel at Syracuse University. In his last game for Syracuse, the 1957 Collegiate North/South All-Star game, he scored five goals in just one half against the top players in the nation. Although best remembered for his achievements on the football field, Brown has been quoted as saying, “I’d rather play lacrosse six days a week and football on the seventh.”