The Face-off In Traditional American Indian Lacrosse

by Dr. Thomas Vennum, Jr.

Early published accounts of lacrosse as played by its American Indian originators throughout the eastern half of North America contain minimal technical information. They focus mostly on the numbers playing, size of the field, shape of the sticks, some of the special ball-play attire—animal skins and body paint, for instance—and almost always the roughness of the game. Very little information, however, is imparted concerning the techniques of stick-handling, strategies for scoring or rules of the game (there were not many).

We know, for instance, that the white-ash stick used by Great Lakes teams, which terminated in an enclosed circle scarcely larger than the ball itself, has changed little over the past century, but nowhere do we find written accounts of how one passed with such a stick or retrieved a ground ball. Recent interviews with Great Lakes elders from such tribes as the Menominee and Ojibwe who remember playing with such a stick has helped fill some of the voids in our knowledge of stick-handling. Some of their information is supported by visual sources—drawings, paintings and a few photographs. We now know that to retrieve a ground ball—usually a solid sphere carved from a knot in a tree or even formed from clay baked hard—the Great Lakes player simply clamped the round end of his stick over the ball; with a deft swift twist of the wrist, he was able to capture and take up the ball in the round hoop supported by its minimal webbing—usually just two thongs of rawhide crossed and tied where they met halfway across the diameter of the open circle. (This technique, in some ways, resembles the child's challenge of tossing a small ball into the air and capturing its fall into its cavity or cup only slightly larger than the ball, attached to the cup with a string.) Over time this Native technique came to be credited to its originators and thus today is aptly known as "the Indian scoop." That this technique was common in the Great Lakes Indian game at least 150 years is attested by an oil painting by Charles Deas (circa 1850) in the collection of the Institution of American History and Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The painting depicts four Eastern Dakota (Santee Sioux) players in the foreground; one is attempting to scoop up a ground ball while his opponent has brought his stick down over the other stick in an apparent attempt to block the maneuver. (Two of the players wear moccasins, the others are barefoot; one player has an elaborate feather bussle tied around his waist.)

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One aspect of Indian lacrosse frequently commented on was how the game was started. What seems to have been the most common procedure to set the ball in play was simply to toss the ball into the air at midfield, where it would then be fought over on its descent or when it landed on the ground. The man who performed this function might have been a chief, coach or medicine man, although the same person may have served more than one of these roles. There was always the element of surprise at not knowing when he would toss up the ball. In some places a song would accompany the start of the game. As Franklin Bassina described the Red Cliff Ojibwa practice in northern Wisconsin, a singer accompanied himself on a small drum at centerfield alongside the man tossing the ball. When he threw it aloft, the singer would stop his song abruptly "and then he'd get the hell out of there," as players scrambled for possession of the ball.

Starting a game in this way and repeating the toss-up after each goal was scored seems to be the oldest Indian method and is practiced even today by such tribes as the Creek in Oklahoma. There a medicine man lines up each team facing each other at centerfield. He begins singing an elaborate chant, as he paces back and forth between the lines of players; then, without warning, he throws the ball aloft and dodges out-of-the-way. Today's face-off in mid-field seems to have been an invention of the white man, some time after he adapted the Mohawk game (circa 1850) and introduced a set of rules, attempting to "civilize" this "savage" sport. However at one time, among the Iroquois there does appear to have been something resembling today's face-off over a ball on the ground. The version of the game as practiced by the Iroquois, although it is not clear how it developed. That it may have even derived from Indian practice is suggested by the account of an 1897 game between the Seneca and Mohawk tribes in what is presently upstate New York. An eyewitness to this game, Samuel Woodruff described how 50 players from each side advanced to mid-field, while 10 players from each team stationed themselves at the goals. His depiction of the face-off bears a remarkable resemblance, more to "the draw" in today's women's game than the face-off in the men's game. "The match was begun by two of the opposing players, who advanced to the ball, and with their united bats raised it from the ground to such an elevation as gave a chance for a fair stroke; when, quick as lightening, it was sped through the air almost with the swiftness of a bullet. Much depends on the first stroke, and great skill is exerted to obtain it."

A century later, the Mohawk appear to be using a different technique—one similar to setting the puck in motion in today's hockey game. Louis Henry Morgan in his League of the Iroquois describes a game beginning about noon with "center players" forming two parallel lines facing each other, "The ball was dropped between the two files of players, and taken between the bats of the two who stood in the middle of each file, opposite to each other. Then after a brief struggle between them, in which each player endeavored, with his bat, to get possession of the ball, and give it the first impulse towards his own gate, it was thrown out and then commenced the pursuit." An 1892 report published in the American Anthropologist shows the Iroquois face-off to approximate today's practice, although from Hewitt's description it is unclear whether this began on the ground or at waist height, as women players perform "the draw" today. The game began with two captains holding their sticks in the form of a Maltese cross, "[The ball] is placed mid-way between the ends of the network on each club; then by a steady push each captain endeavors to throw the ball in the direction of the goal to which his side must bear it."

Dr. Vennum, Senior Ethnomusicologist Emeritus at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Studies at the Smithsonian, received his B.A. from Yale and Ph.D. from Harvard. He is the author of American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). Visit www.tvennum.com to learn more about him.

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