The GAME of the STICK

TODAY'S FAST MOVING SPORT WAS FIRST PLAYED BY NATIVE TRIBESMEN TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS AND STAY FIT FOR BATTLE.

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

George Catlin's 1846-1859 painting, *An Indian Ball-Play*, depicts Plains Indians playing lacrosse.

We know lacrosse as the other Canadian sport, played when it is too warm for hockey. Yet, history has a much higher regard for the game. Lacrosse was the national sport of America—before there was an America.

Before the European colonization, the continent was populated by hundreds of nations and tribes. The Chinook of the Pacific Northwest and the Choctaw along the southeastern Atlantic were unaware of each other and spoke distinctly different languages. Yet both played lacrosse. So did most of the native peoples. The same game was known by different names. Some tribes referred to it as "stick ball." Others called it "Little Brother of War." One tribe among the Iroquois nation knew it as baggataway, meaning "they bump hips."

Like today's players, the tribesmen wielded a stick to catch, carry or hurl the ball. In general appearance, the stick has not greatly changed in seven centuries. It resembled a shepherd's crook, with a net at the curled end of the stick. The ball varied, though, and could be a stone, wood or hair-stuffed deerskin. However, the greatest difference was the dimension of the original game. Whereas today we pit teams of 10 players against each other, the competing tribes would have as many as 1,000 players on each side. The game would last from sunrise to sunset, and might continue for several days. Using the sticks to flail as well as catch, the winning tribe was

determined by the fewest casualties as well as the most goals. The game was indeed the "Little Brother of War," and often used to resolve conflicts. Even without the threat of a war, many tribes used the game for martial training. Yet, for all its rowdy violence, the game was regarded with reverence. Some tribal lore attributed the game's origins as a gift from the Gods. Shamans would schedule and referee the matches.

Ironically, the first European to describe the game deplored it for both the violence and paganism. He was Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649), a French missionary to the Hurons. Writing in his journal, the Jesuit referred to "le jeu de la crosse"—the game of the stick. The French word for stick became our name for the sport: La Crosse. Brebeuf would become a saint, but not the patron of sports fans. La Crosse became quite popular among the colonists of New France, as Canada was then known. By the mid-18th century, New France also included the region we know as the Midwest (where today's states derived from L'Illinois and Ouiconsin) and the entire Mississippi Valley, all the way to Louisiana. Yet, in this vast region, France had only 100,000 colonists. Its rival Britain commanded a smaller empire, 13 colonies constricted between the Atlantic and the Appalachian Mountains, but those colonies had a population of 2 million—restless to expand into French territory.

War was inevitable, and with the advantages in numbers and the world's best navy, Britain won a new empire. That victory, however, proved costly. Those 13 British colonies so eager for French territory resented the taxes for that war. The Revolutionary War ensued and the United States of America was born. But Britain held on to Canada and it became a haven for those who had supported the Crown during the American Revolution. Among the dispossessed allies of Britain was the Mohawk tribe. Wanting a reliable and tough supporter in a strategically important region, Britain granted the Mohawks land in Southern Quebec and Eastern Ontario. There, they could be a useful bulwark against future American aggression and a damper on French unrest. La Crosse kept the Mohawks fit and martial, and indeed they protected Canada during the War of 1812.

As the years passed and so did the American threat, the Mohawks lost their military purpose. Now they played La Crosse to retain their cultural identity against the diluting and assimilating encroachments of modern society. Their Canadian neighbors may not have realized the game's sociological role but they did appreciate it as an engaging sport. People were willing to pay to see La Crosse. In 1834, a Mohawk team had an exhibition match in Montreal. Of course, some spectators wanted to be players. By 1842, they had established in Montreal the first Lacrosse Club.

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Since most native tribes played lacrosse, Americans also were somewhat familiar with the sport. In 1805, while surveying the Great Lakes region, an Army expedition saw Winnebago tribesmen playing. Zebulon Pike, the expedition's commander, named the site for the game; and it is still known as La Crosse, Wisconsin. Today, we have George Catlin's pictures and sketches of the Choctaw tribe playing lacrosse. In his studies of the Native American, Catlin had visited the Choctaws in the early 1830s when they still lived in the Southeastern United States. Sadly, shortly after his visit, the tribe was expelled from their ancestral homes and forcibly relocated to the Oklahoma territory. The Americans tended to regard the "Indian" as an obstacle and enemy, and they dismissed lacrosse as just a game for "savages." By the time that lacrosse was reinvented as a refined, civilized sport, the American public was already passionately distracted by a radically altered version of cricket: baseball.

William George Beers, above, is considered "The Father of Modern Lacrosse." The Montreal Lacrosse Club, 1867, top right. Now a popular collegiate sport, lacrosse has caught on with women—including Stanford University's Lauren Schmidt.

In the 1870s, lacrosse had become a gentlemen's game, reflecting the highest standards of Victorian sportsmanship. This remarkable transformation was the work and crusade of William George Beers, "The Father of Modern Lacrosse." As a Montreal

teenager, Beers (1843-1900) had played lacrosse when it was still the rowdy melee of the native tribes. That game had no set rules; prior to each match the teams would agree to whatever rules they wanted. The young Beers evidently enjoyed the anarchy and the ensuing injuries may well have inspired him to be a dentist; however, he also believed that the game should be elevated by a civilizing code of conduct.

Beers established the Canadian National Lacrosse Foundation in 1867. It—meaning Beers—would set the standards for the game. Lacrosse would be played with uniform equipment. Sticks would be the same length and a rubber ball would replace the stuffed deerskin. There would be a limited number of players on a team. Games now had time limits. The playing field had to meet exact standards for length and width; the size and placement of the goal nets was specific. Finally, players had to observe a far more confining conduct. Lacrosse was no longer a little war or a big brawl: no more slugging, butting or kicking—and the stick was not a weapon. Lacrosse would still be a fast-paced, rugged sport, but now it would be respectable.

In hindsight, Beers might seem like a Victorian prig but he chiefly was motivated by patriotism. The same year—1867—Canada had achieved the status of a British Dominion. While its foreign policy was still decided in London, Canada now determined and administered its own domestic policies. For all practical purposes, Canadians were no longer British subjects but citizens of their own Canada. Beers saw lacrosse as the quintessence of Canada, with its New World vigor refined by European civilization. He promoted lacrosse as "the unifying symbol for the emerging Canadian nationality." In 1869, he published his manifesto and codification in, *Lacrosse, The National Game of Canada.* (The Canadian Parliament would eventually concur in 1994.)

Beers also served as lacrosse's ambassador to the world. In 1876, he organized a team of Canadian and Native Americans to play exhibition matches in the major cities of Great Britain. Of course, the highest measure of Victorian respectability was the presence of Queen Victoria herself. She expressed her enjoyment ("the game was pretty to watch"), and so conferred on lacrosse its suitability for genteel women as well as men. In 1928 and 1932, the game earned a berth at the Olympics as a demonstration sport. In the United States, playoffs were held to determine which team would compete; both times, the Blue Jays of Johns Hopkins University earned the coveted spot. (The U.S. earned a three-way tie with Canada and Great Britain in 1928, and bested Canada two games to one in 1932.)

Today, the sport that had its origins in North America is rapidly gaining popularity around the world. The 2010 World Lacrosse Championship, sponsored by the Federation of International Lacrosse and held in Manchester, England, drew teams from 29 nations. Lacrosse has also caught on with the ladies. According to the NCAA, there are currently 349 women's collegiate teams. If, as Beers promised, that lacrosse taught a young gentleman "confidence and pluck," then it obviously offers the same benefits to coeds. And the shamans and braves who originated lacrosse might well have attested to the same virtues of the game. Whether for tribe, nation or alumni association, lacrosse continues to instill a rousing sense of pride and identity.