

The History of Lacrosse



The crowd cheers as a team of boys runs down a game field. The players hold long sticks with small nets at the top. One player twists his wrist and throws his arm forward. Suddenly, a rubber ball shoots from the end of the stick and slices through the air. Score! You have just witnessed a goal in the game of lacrosse. This game may be new to you, but it has a long history. Its origins can be traced back to as early as the twelfth century, when Native Americans played it.

A Serious Sport

Lacrosse is fun to play, but Native Americans did not play to entertain themselves. They had a more serious reason to play. The game was often part of an important spiritual ceremony and a sign of honor and respect.

Playing by Different Rules

Native Americans had to make do with what was available when they played. Instead of rubber balls, they used hair-stuffed, deerskin balls. Different tribes had different rules for playing the sport. Some tribes played with two sticks, one in each hand. Other tribes played with only one stick.



Large Teams and Long Games

Cherokees had a very practical use for the sport. They called it the “little brother of war” because it was considered such good military training. While modern-day lacrosse teams have 12 players, Cherokee teams could have anywhere from 100 to more than 2,000 players! It was common for an entire tribe to form one team. Since the goals could be placed miles apart, players had to be in great physical condition to run back and forth between them. Cherokee players had to communicate well and work together as a team; otherwise, it would be impossible to score. As you can imagine, the game must have moved along very slowly. In fact, games sometimes lasted for days!

The Game Changes

The modern-day popularity of lacrosse in southern Ontario and upstate New York may be due the Six Tribes of the Iroquois. They called their version of the game “baggataway” or “tewaraathon.” The sticks were made of strong wood and the nets were made of either bark, leather, or deer hide. The Iroquois played the game in a very organized way. Only 12 to 15 players were allowed per team, and the goals were set just 120 feet apart.

The Game Gets a Name

The first Europeans to see the game played were most likely French explorers. In fact, early French settlers gave the game its name—lacrosse—which means “a game played with a curved stick and a ball.” The French enjoyed the game, and its popularity spread. Before long, Europeans in Canada were playing the game, as well.

Women Join In

The first women’s lacrosse game took place in Scotland. Eventually, lacrosse was established as a women’s sport in other countries, too. Today, lacrosse is played by many groups of people all over the world. As more people learn the game, lacrosse is rapidly increasing in popularity.

