

Fostering Native Youth Growth Through Stickball and Lacrosse

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Lacrosse is a growing sport that has spread throughout the country. It takes a lot of skill, often being recognized as having aspects from football, soccer and hockey, combined into one sport. While it has continued to grow in popularity, understanding the connection between lacrosse and the origins of lacrosse is essential in establishing a traditional health and wellness program that will appeal to Native youth. Through a collaborative effort, educators of this program coached and taught modern game techniques, traditional importance and how to balance the modern game with historical and cultural connections, which creates a fundamental, invaluable and personal relationship between Native youth and the sport of lacrosse.

In Fall 2011, the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies (BCAIS), Muscogee-Creek Nation Museum and Cultural Center, Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL) Men's Lacrosse Team, The Stickstop Lacrosse and Field Hockey Store of St. Louis, Tulsa Youth Lacrosse Association (TYLA) and the Oklahoma State University Native American Student Association Stickball Team came together for a lacrosse clinic that was held at the Tulsa Indian Community Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma; thirty-three children, ages eight to fourteen, participated in the clinic. The youth were engaged, as the clinic embraced the spiritual and community aspects of the traditional Creek stickball (lacrosse), and made the connection between these beliefs and the modern day sport of lacrosse. During the opening session of the event, Dr. Pete Coser, Sr., Assistant Vice President for the Center of American Indians at Bacone College and from the Kvssetv Tribal Town, shared with parents, participants and clinicians that, among the Muscogee-Creek people, stickball teaches players about purification rites and cer-



Photo by Justin Giles

Stickball toss

emonies, which describes the Creek term for stickball, “afvckety”, meaning “happiness”.

By fostering team spirit and a sense of identity, lacrosse and stickball can fulfill a traditional core value, by being the “medicine game.” In an effort to demonstrate this, specific goals included: providing Muscogee-Creek and Tulsa area Native youth the education necessary to gain an understanding of cultural identity and physical health, by learning the histories of lacrosse and stickball, as well as modern lacrosse. Playing this sport; fostered team connections, creating a sense of belonging and self-confidence, by running basic teamwork drills, and expanded national youth exercise and sport programs, through experiential and participatory learning.



Battling for a “ground-ball”!

The day began with a prayer and participants lined up to receive a jersey, from The Stickstop. Shortly thereafter, the new lacrosse players, also known as “laxers”, were split into smaller groups, with instructors from the Oklahoma State University Native American Student Association Stickball Team, and learned techniques of playing the “social game,” a variation of stickball, in which women play against men. Clinicians from the WUSTL Men’s Lacrosse Team, BCAIS and the Muscogee-Creek Cultural Center and Museum distributed lacrosse sticks that were provided by TYLA. Participants were instructed in the techniques of scooping “ground-balls”, throwing, catching, passing and shooting. The new ‘laxers’ were excited to test the speed of their lacrosse shots; Assistant Coach, Wayne Jaeckle, used his radar gun to capture the speed of each shot.

At the end of the day, the coaches and players took a group photo. The new “laxer” participants left the clinic with enthusiasm for a sport they had never played before and a cool, new jersey to wear at school. Coaches and administration came away with a deep appreciation of the sport and the potential impact on young children. Collectively, this was a very successful clinic, as our collaborative community-based project embraced cultural and spiritual connections of the original sport (stickball) with modern day lacrosse.

In retrospect, as these Native children learn to balance two worldviews, American Indian and ‘mainstream,’ maintaining cultural identity is critical. During the program, youth had an opportunity to learn and play both traditional stickball and modern lacrosse games. It was the exposure to cultural connections, within the modern lacrosse, that helped the participants’ engagement playing lacrosse. Learning about the cultural connections, in different aspects, including the notion of balance, could help these students, as they learn how

to maintain their cultural identity, while maneuvering through “mainstream” society (i.e. school).

In response, one clinic participant said, “This was really fun. Thank you for inviting me and for the coaches coming a long way. I loved it!” Another participant stated, “I would really like to thank the coaches from St. Louis, and the other two guys for stickball and would like to do this again.” The lacrosse clinic sought to engage youth in a traditional curriculum, offering spiritual, cultural, health and wellness components. Combining the efforts of the Muscogee-Creek Nation Museum and Cultural Center, WUSTL Men’s Lacrosse Team, Tulsa Youth Lacrosse Association, Oklahoma State University Native American Student Association Stickball Team, The Stickstop Store and the Buder Center will hope to strengthen the international movement to connect Indigenous youth to health and wellness programs, utilizing a traditional sport as the mechanism. ♦



Photo by Tom Schmidt, Head Coach, Washington University in St. Louis

Dan Fleisher (Green Jersey), Senior Captain, Washington University in St. Louis Men’s Lacrosse Team, teaching young Native women about “face-offs.”



Photo by Justin Giles

Native Ladies Lacrosse