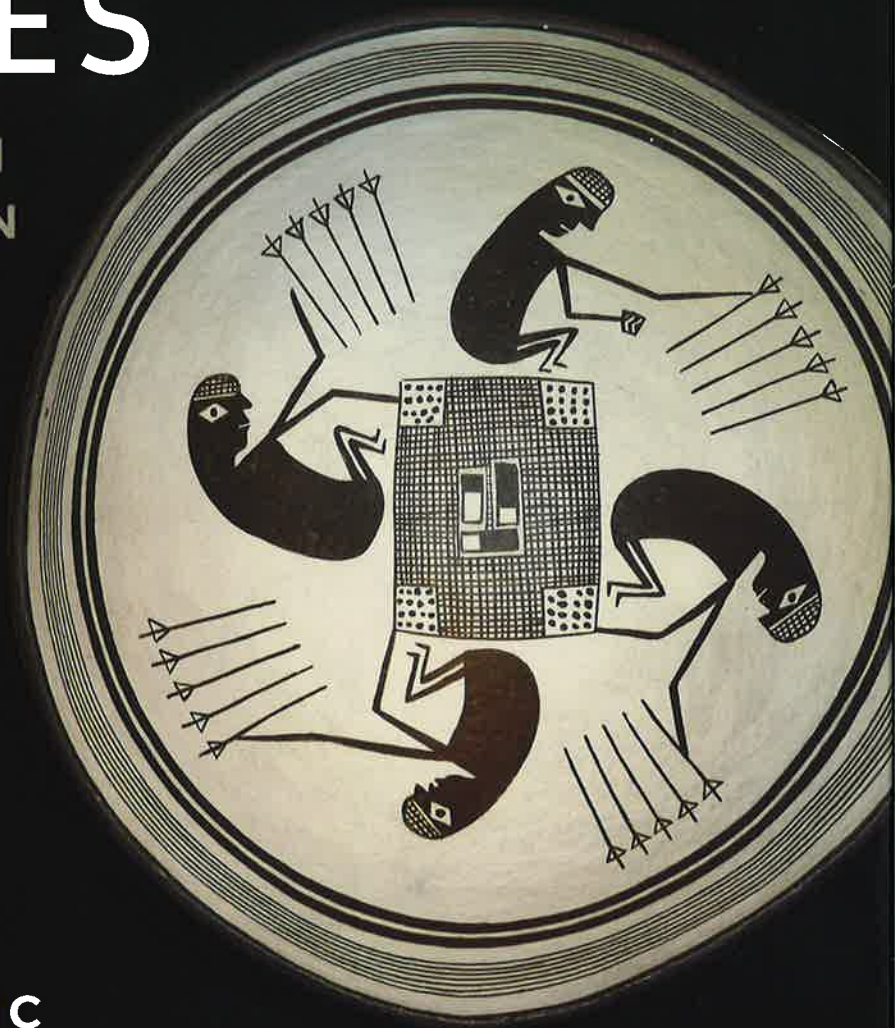


PREHISTORIC GAMES

OF NORTH
AMERICAN
INDIANS



SUBARCTIC
TO MESOAMERICA

edited by BARBARA VOORHIES

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"He Must Die Unless the Whole Country Shall Play Crosse"

The Role of Gaming in Great Lakes Indigenous Societies

RONALD F. WILLIAMSON AND MARTIN S. COOPER

In this chapter, we examine the ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence for gaming in the Great Lakes region and explore the roles these games played in people's lives. For the Iroquoian and Anishinaabeg peoples of northeastern North America, indigenous games, such as lacrosse, the maiden's ballgame, dish/bowl, straws, snow snake, javelin, moccasin, and cup-and-pin, represented much more than sport. They involved aspects of physical prowess, warfare, prestige, gambling, dreaming, mourning, curing, and shamanism. Gambling, in particular, was an important cultural activity that, according to seventeenth-century accounts, resulted in serious consequences. In the winter of 1623–1624, for example, Gabriel Sagard, a Recollet friar, witnessed a Huron-Wendat man returning to his village naked and singing after having left everything in the hands of a Frenchman, including his clothing, moccasins, wife, and children, although his family members were later returned.

Lacrosse, like other games, was a game played, however, by not only the Wendat but by all the Northern Iroquoians and many of their Algonquian neighbors. The region occupied by Northern Iroquoians constitutes most of what is now known as southern Ontario, southwestern Quebec, New York State, and northern Pennsylvania (Figure 4.1).

The Wendat were the northernmost of the Iroquoians, historically inhabiting the land between Georgian Bay on Lake Huron and Lake Simcoe. The relatively small Tionontaté (Petun)

Nation lived immediately to the southwest and resembled the Wendat in most linguistic and cultural respects. The tribes of the Neutral Confederacy (called Attiwandaron by the Wendat) lived farther to the south between the west end of Lake Ontario, lower Grand River Valley, and the Niagara River. The Erie were a group relatively unknown to early European visitors, inhabiting the area of the southeastern end of Lake Erie. Even less is known about the Wenro (Oneronon), also a small group that lived in western New York State, between the Neutral and Seneca. The five tribes (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk) of the Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee) lived in tribal clusters across central New York State; the tribes were culturally distinctive due to their long, separate developments, as reflected in language and material culture differences, as well as clan organization, kinship terms, and mortuary patterns. The Susquehannock lived to the south of the Iroquois, on the lower Susquehanna River, and their linguistic relationship to the other Northern Iroquoian languages is unclear. There were also Iroquoian-speaking communities living in the sixteenth century (and earlier) in the St. Lawrence River valley west of Quebec City. Encountered by Jacques Cartier in his 1534 and 1535 visits to eastern Canada, they had moved elsewhere by the time of Samuel de Champlain's visit of 1603.

Northern Iroquoians relied on horticulture for subsistence and inhabited often-fortified

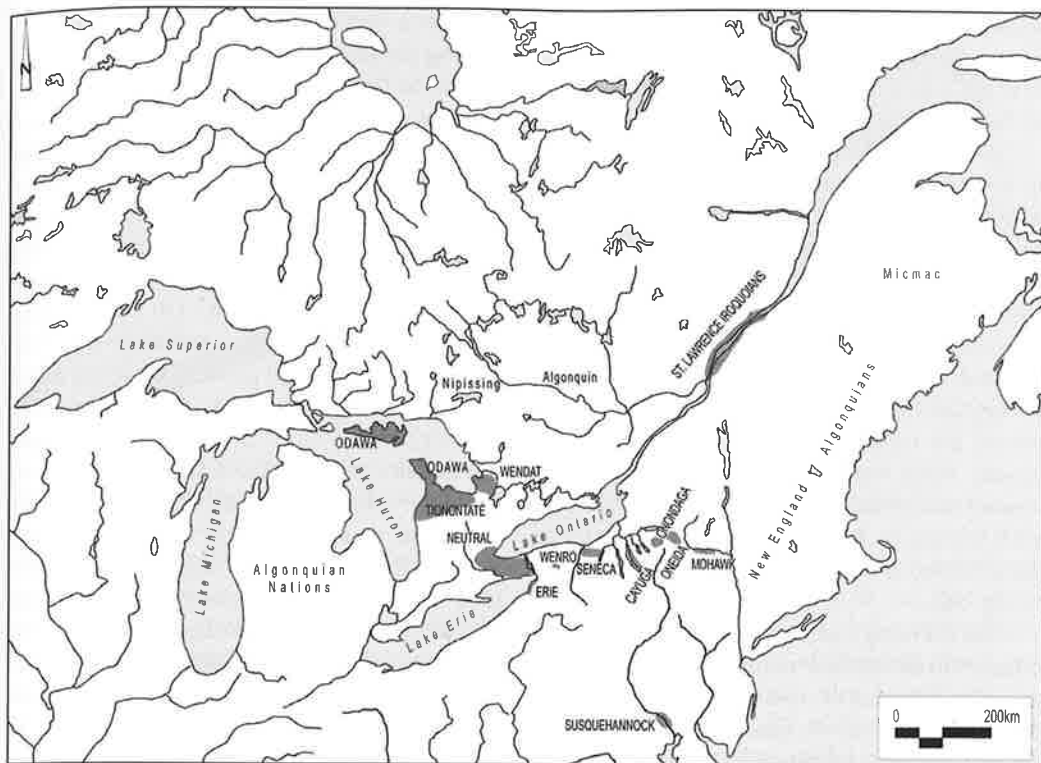


FIGURE 4.1. Locations of select Great Lakes indigenous societies. (Drawn by Archaeological Services Inc.)

villages containing bark-covered longhouses shared by extended families. They had matrilineally defined membership in clans that extended beyond each village to other communities, thereby integrating villages within tribes and confederacies. They shared a set of religious beliefs and social values and attitudes; and they participated in ritualized warfare and prisoner sacrifice (Trigger 1976:91–104).

There is also a rich seventeenth-century documentary record of the lives of Northern Iroquoians. These include the works of Samuel de Champlain, an experienced soldier and explorer who recorded his observations during a winter spent with the Wendat in 1615–1616 (Biggar 1922–1936); the account of Gabriel Sagard, a Recollet friar, who spent the winter of 1623–1624 with the Wendat (Wrong 1939); and the annual accounts of the Jesuit priests who lived among the Wendat from 1634 until 1650 and among the Iroquois from 1654 to 1667 (Thwaites 1896–1901).

The ancestral Tionontaté and Wendat were closely tied economically and politically to

their Algonquian or Anishinaabeg neighbors: the Tionontaté with the Odawa and the Wendat with the Nipissing. The Odawa, or Ottawa, were situated on the Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island, and the eastern shore of Georgian Bay, while the Nipissing inhabited the region of the lake by the same name, situated on the historic route between Quebec and the Wendat country. Throughout the 1640s, the Mississauga and Ojibwa Nations were situated along the shores of Georgian Bay and the north shore of Lake Huron, near what is now Sault Ste. Marie (Michigan and Ontario). There were also Algonquian nations, such as the Potawatomi and Fox, who, at the time of contact, lived immediately south of the Great Lakes in Michigan and Ohio.

Lacrosse

Lacrosse is a traditional men's team sport in which players use long-handled sticks to propel a ball into the opponent's goal area. The first Europeans who witnessed the game thought it resembled a stick-and-ball game played in France

known as *crosse*, thereby explaining the origin of the term. It has erroneously been attributed to Brébeuf, who purportedly named it for a crook or bishop's crosier (Vennum 1994:71).

In 1636, the Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf reported in his annual account to his superior, Paul Le Jeune in Quebec, that there were three kinds of games among the Wendat (Huron)—“*crosse*,” “*dish*,” and “*straw*,” the first two of which were best for healing. He went on to describe a dying man with a severe fever, for which the shaman ordered, as a cooling remedy, a game of *crosse*, noting that the ill sometimes dreamed that they would die unless the whole country played *crosse*. What would follow was a game in a cleared field, village contending against village, with betting on the outcome, thereby creating great interest in the contest (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10:185–89).

The following year, in the face of an epidemic, a hunchback shaman named Tonnerauanont prescribed a game of *crosse* to heal the sick and rid the country of the disease. The game was announced, and all the young men were entreated to do their duty and play, otherwise many would die and a great misfortune would befall the whole country (Thwaites 1896–1901, 13:130). The game was played to no avail. Within days, more than a dozen individuals were severely ill; the shaman, not the game, was blamed for the calamity.

Another one of many subsequent games of *crosse* played in Canada occurred over two centuries later in Montreal in celebration of Canadian Confederation. Played between the Montreal Lacrosse Club and a team from the Mohawk community of Kahnawake, which won the match, it represented an important cultural exchange. *Crosse* and other indigenous games that have survived the generations are part of the reason that Canada can be described as a Métis (mixed blood) society, shaped from four centuries of interaction with indigenous populations who instructed and enabled the first European visitors to live in the Canadian environment (Saul 2008). Lacrosse is now recognized in Canadian law as “Canada’s National Summer Sport.”

The Game and Its Contexts

Among the Wendat, it was the shaman who explained to the ill the extent and nature of their sickness, thereafter prescribing a dog feast, a game of *crosse* or *dish*, sleeping on a particular skin, or some other remedy (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10:197). Lacrosse was also played to influence the weather (Thwaites 1896–1901, 14:47) and in memory of an excellent player on his death (Thwaites 1896–1901, 15:179). On May 19, 1637, for example, one shaman’s reputation was challenged after nearly half a foot of snow had fallen and then frozen very hard, likely threatening a newly planted crop. There had been a rigorous match two days previously, as the shaman had asserted that the weather depended only upon a game of *crosse*. He was charged with being a charlatan and an impostor (Thwaites 1896–1901, 14:47). Many courses of action were also informed through dreams during which a bird, flame, or ghost would appear and dictate to Wendat people the occasion of their feasts; their success in hunting, fishing, war, or trade with the French; and when to employ dances and games (Thwaites 1896–1901, 15:179).

Whatever the impetus for playing the game, it seems that all of the Northern Iroquoian groups and their Anishinaabeg neighbors played a similar game—Algonquians referred to it as *baggataway*, the Wendat as *kahwendae*, and the Mohawk as *tewaarathon*. In all cases, it was far more than a leisure activity, being spiritually embedded in their respective cultures. Rather than simply a game, it was ceremony. The Iroquois, for example, refer to it as the Creator’s Game; the Cayuga Nation today continues to play a ceremonial game every spring to honor and entertain the Creator and Thunder Entities and to thank them for clearing the air (Dao Jao Dre [Delmor Jacobs] 2011:28). Algonquians view the game with equal reverence, having been given the game by the Manitou long ago along with the responsibility to play in the same way as their ancestors; and it was prominent in mourning among the Fox (Michelson 1925:38).

A match was seldom played before noon and usually involved two parties of equal numbers. The game sometimes involved hundreds

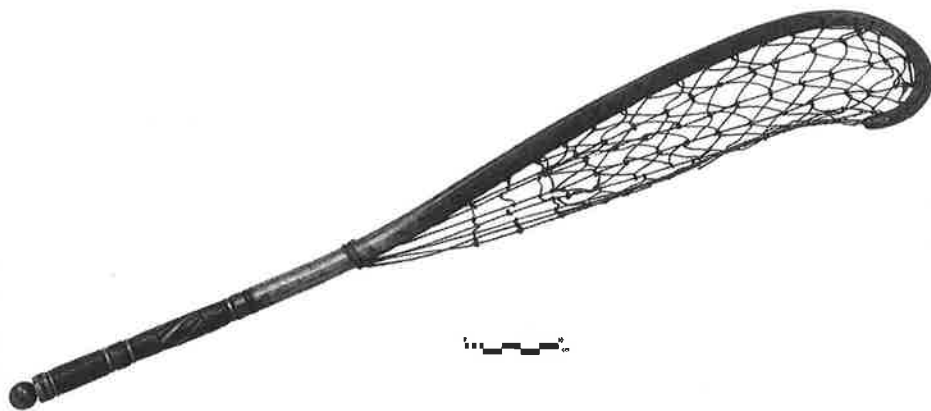


FIGURE 4.2. Example of an indigenous lacrosse stick, Six Nations, Ontario. (Royal Ontario Museum. Photographed by John Howarth for Archaeological Services Inc.)

of players, especially in those cases where the match was between nations. More often, it was between adjacent communities or clans within one or more communities. The players were next to naked but were elaborately painted and ornamented (Hewitt 1892:191).

Games would be played on extensive meadows or grass plains with natural boundaries and goal lines hundreds of paces apart and might continue for several days. The basic game played at the time of contact survived into the early nineteenth century largely unchanged, after which it was modernized. The objective of the game was to pass a ball through the opposing team's goal area by any means. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fields were 180–360 m (600–1,200 ft) in length and the goalposts—3–4.5 m (10–15 ft) in length—were set 5–15 paces apart. Clearly, the game required considerable endurance. Footraces, at least among the Iroquois, were an event held at the conclusion of mourning or other civic councils, with runners dressed in the same manner as for lacrosse (Morgan 1972:307). Perhaps these races were regularly undertaken with explicit intent to maintain fitness levels for the game.

Early playing sticks appear to have been 3–5 ft long and formed with a curved end. Later varieties, depending on their nation of origin, could have nets on their ends drawn sufficiently taut to allow the player to carry the ball through

opposing players or throw it a great distance, even up to 91 m (300 ft; Figure 4.2). The sticks were made of hickory, a traditional wood also favored for the carving of false face masks and traditional canes. Even today, Iroquois sometimes use wooden sticks, while other teams play with composites. The wood is considered alive; infant boys are given a miniature version, team members sleep with their playing sticks nearby, or even in bed, and take one with them into the grave (S. Price 2010). The balls were reportedly made of hair-stuffed deerskin, knotted leather strips, or wood (the latter often from knots or burl) and varied in size from that of tennis balls to softballs (Blair 1911; Fisher 2002; Hewitt 1892; Vennum 1994).

It appears that in earlier forms of the game, players were permitted aggressive physical contact of any nature in order to move the ball down the field. This resulted in many injuries to players, both minor and so severe as to cause permanent deformity or even death. Players would rarely complain for fear of being considered weak (Copway 1972 [1850]:45). In this way, and in the use of the stick almost as a weapon, young men were engaged in training as warriors, some societies even referring to such games as “the little brother of war” (Blair 1911:95; Fisher 2002:13–14). Vennum notes that the butt ends of some lacrosse sticks, like war clubs, were carved with balls held in the mouths or talons



FIGURE 4.3. Butt end of lacrosse stick with carved ball, Six Nations, Ontario. (Royal Ontario Museum. Photographed by John Howarth for Archaeological Services Inc.)

of a bird of prey or snake's jaws (Figure 4.3; Vennum 1994:xiii). The ball would then be released symbolically to fly through the air to strike the enemy. Lacrosse was even used in June of 1763 as a ruse to gain entry into Fort Michilimackinac, with an errant ball pursued by players and spectators through the open gate. They then laid waste to the fort (Henry 1809).

As in all other public games of these nations, spectators were important participants, and a match presented an opportunity to bet on the outcome. The stakes and gambling were considered as important an aspect of the ceremony as the game itself.

Maiden's Ball Play

Another game recorded among the Anishinaabeg in the mid-nineteenth century is noteworthy in its similarities to aspects of lacrosse; it too was known to have been played as a curative event at the request of an ailing individual (Copway 1972 [1850]:49–50). Called Maiden's Ball Play or *pah-pah-se-kah-way*, it was played mainly by young women with a ball made of two deerskin bags, each about 13 cm (5 in) long and 2.5 cm (1 in) in diameter, tied together at a distance of 18 cm (7 in) from one another.¹ The ball was thrown

with a stick 1.5 m (5 ft) long. Played in the summer, the young women of the village would try to run home with the ball.

As in the men's game, pandemonium existed, with crowds rushing to follow the ball and participants chanting, stumbling, and injuring themselves. Worked garters, moccasins, leggings, and vermilion were generally the articles at stake, although the chief of the village might send a parcel prior to the game, the contents of which were distributed among the women when the game concluded.

Dish/Bowl

Dish is another game that was prominent in healing ceremonies among Great Lakes groups and beyond, especially if the ill person had dreamed of its use in his or her case (Blair 1911; Thwaites 1896–1901, 10:187–89, 13:131–32, 17:159, 201–07; Wrong 1939:97). Once decided, several times each winter, the civil chiefs in the village called a council to arrange the time and invitation for the opposing village, an envoy being sent with the invitation. If accepted, players in both villages made preparations, which included fasting and abstinence from sexual intercourse, as well as feasting and singing the evening before.

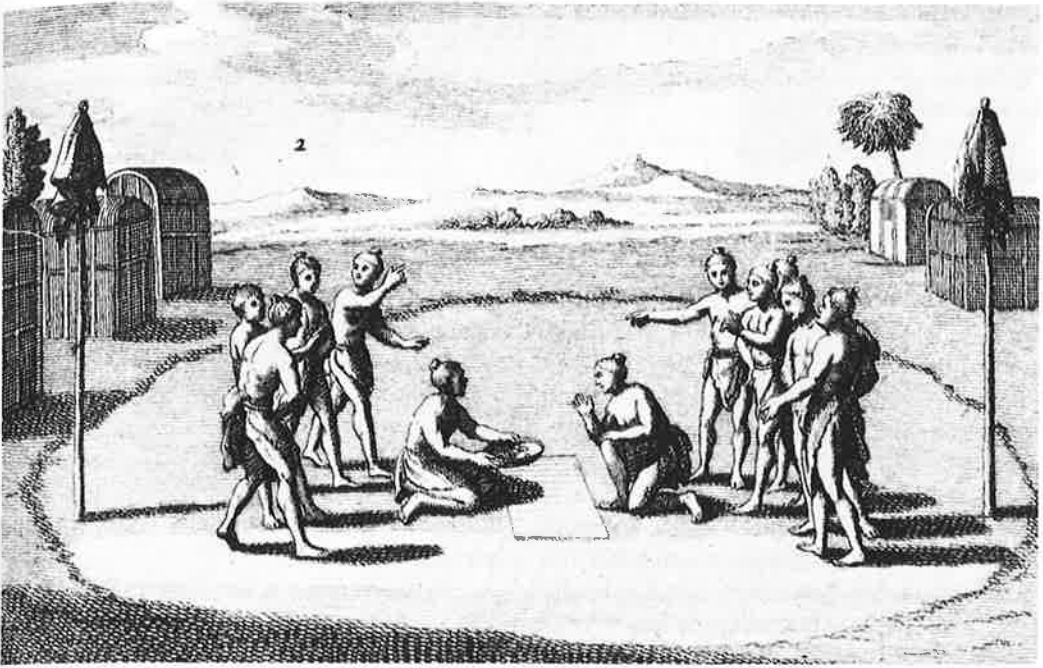


FIGURE 4.4. Game of dish as portrayed in Lafitau, *Moeurs des Sauvages Américains* (1724).

They also displayed their charms and exhorted them, hoping for favorable dreams; they then collected the things they had dreamed would bring them good luck and took them to the game in their pouches. Even an old man thought to bring luck could be brought to the game on the shoulders of young men. One man was known to rub the game pieces with a certain ointment that hardly ever failed to result in a win. The man chosen to hold the dish in the game, however, was someone who had dreamed that he would win.

The game was as a simple one, played among the Wendat with six plumstones, white on one side and black on the other. Play consisted of striking a dish very hard against the ground so that the stones rose and fell, white or black side up. The one who held the bowl cried, "tet, tet, tet, tet" in order to effect a favorable outcome (Figure 4.4). Communities often played against each other; the two players—one for each side—and observers gathered in a longhouse, along with the sick person wrapped in a blanket. The two groups took their places on opposite sides of the house, filling it from top to bottom. Everyone bet

heavily on the outcome, shouting and gesturing to attract good luck and uttering contrary words and gestures to bring bad luck to the other side. Participants only departed after the patient had thanked them for the health he or she had recovered through their help.

Cures were attributed to the play. One Wendat Christian convert, recovering seven or eight days after the bowl game had been played in his house for two or three days, had to explain himself to the Jesuits for the "sin" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 14:81). In one case, however, a young woman, daughter of one of the most important and richest persons in the country in terms of the number of charms he possessed, was requested to attend a game of dish with these charms. At the game, she bet heavily but was suddenly overtaken by the illness that had led to the game in the first place. When she died, this misfortune was attributed to defects and omissions in the forms and details of the ceremonies.

A similar Wendat game, using five or six fruit stones blackened on one side, was usually played by women and girls, although men and boys sometimes played. They held the dice in their

hands and tossed them onto a piece of leather or skin stretched on the ground for that purpose. The stakes were collars, earrings, and other such possessions (Wrong 1939:97).

Among the Iroquois, the bowl game was called *gus-kä-eh* and was played with blackened (on one side) peach stones after the introduction of that fruit. In nineteenth-century accounts of the game, it was the concluding event on the last day of the Green Corn and harvest festivals and also of the New Year's jubilee. It is traced by tradition to the formation of the league and was also thought to be a game enjoyed in the future life in the realm of the Great Spirit. It is still played today in midwinter, midsummer, and at maple syrup time between clans with items such as turtle rattles, lacrosse sticks, wampum, and traditional clothing wagered and held by the Faithkeepers of each side. Frank Speck notes that some people viewed the bowl game as a struggle between the Good and Evil Twins (Speck 1955:83; see also Blau 1967; Engelbrecht 2003:50). In the nineteenth century, it was played in a public council house by a succession of players, two at a time, under the supervision of managers appointed to represent the two parties, usually tribes or clans.

The game might be played for more than one day. Once the betting was concluded, a platform was constructed a few feet above the floor and covered with blankets. The two initial players were seated across from one another, each with five bean counters that were lost or gained from each shaking of the bowl, depending on whether five or six of the fruit stones showed the same color. Once an individual player's counter beans had been lost, the player was replaced by another; all surplus counters being in the care of the team managers. When one of the parties had lost all her beans, the game was concluded. Despite its simplicity, the games generated a great degree of excitement, and when finally decided, the victors celebrated loudly (Morgan 1972:307–12; Dao Jao Dre [Delmor Jacobs] 2011:24–25), although both the winners and losers in one game witnessed in the late nineteenth century were subdued at the end of the game, having been admonished by a chief (Boyle 1900:36–39).

A similar game among the Iroquois, recorded in the nineteenth century, was called *gus-ga-e-sa'tä*, or deer buttons (Morgan 1972:303–04). Played only at fireside, or occasionally during religious councils, the people divided into clans, betting upon the results. Played by two at a time, like the peach-stone game, eight rather than six buttons were employed. They were about 2.5 cm (1 in) in diameter, manufactured of elk horn, rounded and polished, and slightly charred upon one side to blacken them. The game was played on a blanket where the buttons were shaken in the player's hands and then thrown down, the scoring being based on the number of the same color appearing. Like the bowl game, scorekeeping was with beans and concluded with all of the available beans having been taken up by the players.

The bowl game is certainly ancient, given the discovery of wild plum pits, darkened on one side, in pouches placed with adult burials at the late sixteenth-century Seneca Tram and early seventeenth-century Fugle sites (Figure 4.5; Leonard, Chapter 2 this volume; Wray et al. 1991: 136, 145, 653). One antler disc was found with a burial on the late-sixteenth-century Seneca Cameron site and 53 discs were found with female and child burials at the early seventeenth-century Seneca Dutch Hollow site (Sempowski and Saunders 2001:62–63). Discs made of stone, bone, shell, and, more frequently, sherds of ceramic vessels, occasionally decorated on one side, have also been found on numerous ancestral Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquoian sites dating from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries (Figure 4.6).

Straws

Gabriel Sagard also noted that the Wendat were addicted to the game of straws, called *aescara*, for which somewhere between 51 and 201 (always an odd number) white reeds of uniform length, 15–25 cm (6–10 in) long, were divided through a number of quite complicated conventions (Wrong 1939:96–97; Blair 1911:1:96–101). Nicolas Perrot provided a detailed yet incomprehensible account of the game in 1680, noting that players and their comrades often lost all that

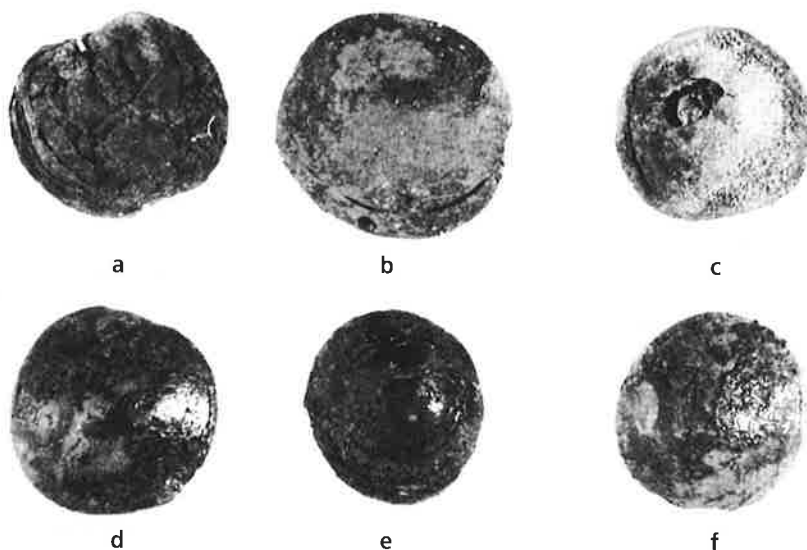


FIGURE 4.5. Worked plum pits, probably used as dice, from the early seventeenth-century Seneca Fugle site. Diameter: 1.3 cm. (Rochester Museum and Science Center, courtesy of the Rock Foundation.)



FIGURE 4.6. Ceramic gaming discs from the early sixteenth-century ancestral Wendat Mantle site on the north-central shore of Lake Ontario. (Canadian Museum of History. Photographed by John Howarth for Archaeological Services Inc.)

they possessed. Perrot's editor and other French observers could not understand the game either, other than to note that both skill and chance played a role.

The game began in a chief's cabin, with all the reeds laid on a skin or blanket and the initial player chanting and contorting his body while thrusting an awl or pointed bone object into the pile of straws, thereby drawing away a number of them. The opponent then took those that remained, counting them with incredible speed in

lots of ten. The individual holding the uneven number won that division and the wagered bet. The complexity of the game increased when different values were given to the actual odd number of remaining straws (1, 5, 7, 9), with the holder of nine always sweeping the board and all bets.

Betting occurred with seeds, stones, or beans, as in the Iroquois bowl game, which were laid on the blanket beside the straws, some representing different values of the wagered goods

and the various combinations of odd numbers of straws. The game often lasted for several days, with players affording credit to opponents who had already lost all their goods. It ended when one side had lost everything, although the desire of the losing side to continue playing often led to hostility. When there was a suspicion of cheating, a recount was undertaken by two of the spectators.

Snow Snake

Another game played by nations in the Great Lakes region is snow snake. While there is only one obscure reference to it in an early seventeenth-century account, it is better known by nineteenth-century accounts among the Iroquois and Anishinaabeg. Like lacrosse, it is still an important cultural practice.

The game involves sliding a stick along a prepared iced track or the surface of a frozen lake and was played by individuals or teams. The main objective was to slide the snow snake the farthest. Players cast these sticks with considerable skill over the ice, sometimes from a small, gently rising incline of frozen snow, such that they "dart from the edge of the snow mound like arrows" (Kohl 1860:401).

Lewis Henry Morgan (1972:304) argued the game was primarily designed as a diversion for the young; but it was occasionally a public game between the nations and always aroused excitement and involved the usual amount of betting.

The earliest documented reference is that of Gabriel Sagard, who in the winter of 1623–1624 observed that the Wendat "play a game with curved sticks, making them slide over the snow" (Wrong 1939:132). Much later descriptions of the practice include those of J. G. Kohl (1860), who described the mid-nineteenth-century use of elegantly carved snow snakes called *shosheman* among the Ojibwa (Chippewa) living on the Apostle Islands in western Lake Superior; Lewis Henry Morgan, who described the Iroquois game in his pioneering 1851 ethnography of the Iroquois; Seneca historian Arthur Parker (1909), whose Seneca name was Gawaso Wanneh or Big Snowsnake, and who observed the game at the turn of the last century and provided a detailed

account; Frances Densmore (1929:68), who observed the game among the eastern Chippewa in the early twentieth century; and a contemporary account by the ethnologist Craig Macdonald, who recorded late twentieth-century use of the snow snake among the Anishinaabeg Temagami First Nation, who reside on Bear Island in Lake Temagami, northern Ontario.

There are notable differences between the Iroquois and Anishinaabeg forms of both the snow snake and the way in which it was thrown. Also, use of a prepared ice track appears to be associated generally with the Iroquois, although use of a track has also been observed among the Eastern Chippewa residing in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The Anishinaabeg sticks, which could range in length from 56 cm for a young man to 91 cm (22 in to 3 ft) for an adult, were slightly bent with a heavy knob gradually tapering to a handle (Densmore 1929:68). The Iroquois snow snake, referred to in Seneca as *gowasa*, was considerably longer: 1.5–2.7 m (5–9 ft) in length and 2.5 cm (1 in) broad at the head, tapering to 6 cm (.25 in) at the tail. It was often decorated at the end with inlaid lead as a protection and to provide weight to propel it farther. The ends were fire hardened and polished in earlier times. Several of the snow snakes examined in the Royal Ontario Museum collection were decorated with eyes and a mouth to resemble the head of a snake (Figure 4.7). Parker recorded that the Seneca snow snake was made of a suitable hardwood, usually maple or walnut, although Morgan noted they were typically made of hickory (Parker 1909:250; Morgan 1972:304). The wood was selected according to whether snow conditions were light and fluffy or crusted. A typical set consisted of three snow snakes, but a complete set for all snow conditions may have included as many as fifteen pieces, which were carried in a compartmentalized cloth bag. Each snow snake had a distinctive design or mark that identified the owner, placed just before the head of the snow snake in a flattened area. The Bear Island snow snake style is symmetrical, with pointed ends, painted a bright color such as yellow, and often has black ends, which resemble porcupine quills (Figure 4.8). The bright colors

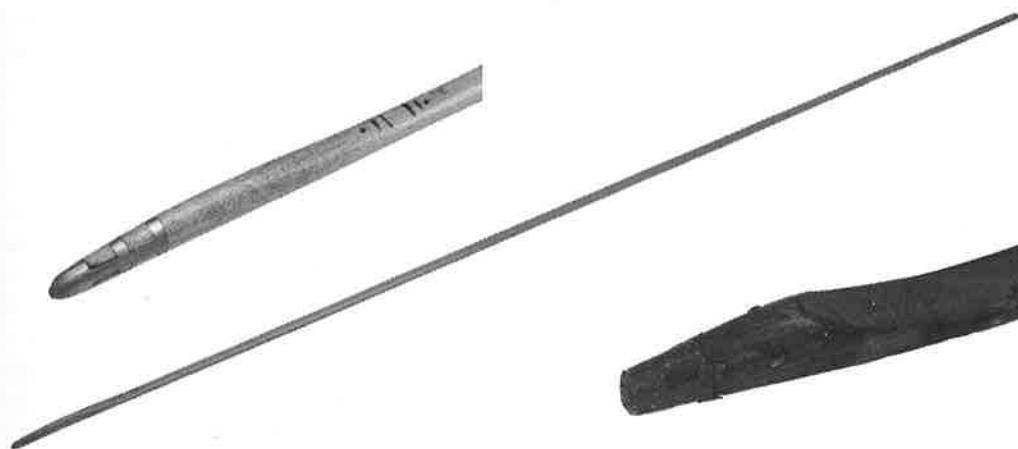


FIGURE 4.7. Snow snakes with inset lead tips, Six Nations, Ontario. Example on lower right is further decorated with eyes and a mouth to resemble the head of a snake. (Royal Ontario Museum. Photographed by John Howarth for Archaeological Services Inc.)



FIGURE 4.8. Contemporary northern Ontario Anishinaabeg-style snow snake. (Crafted by Craig K. Macdonald. Photographed by John Howarth for Archaeological Services Inc.)

not only help identify the owner of the snow snake but make it easier to find in the snow.

The Iroquois snow snake was thrown like a spear, with the player grasping his snake by the tail, thumb, and middle finger on the sides, two or three inches from the end, and index finger bent and tightly pressed against the grooved end.

The player hurls it into the trough, using all of his skill to throw accurately and steadily (Parker 1909:253). Opponents might attempt to startle or throw the player off by jumping toward him at the moment of release, though contact was not allowed. Alternatively, the Anishinaabeg snow snake was sometimes thrown in a sidearm

fashion so that it tumbled end over end. Ideally, it would travel under a thin layer of new snow so that one could observe the snow snake as it moved along the lake ice. When it hit a bump in the ice it would "leap up" and continue along its way.

The Iroquois snow snake was played, among other games such as the bowl game, during important events, such as the Midwinter Ceremony (*gānā'yūs'ta'*), when the two phratries or rival brotherhoods or clans sought to outdo each other. The clans of the Wolf, the Bear, the Turtle, and the Beaver entered their best players against the skilled experts of the Deer, Snipe, Heron, and Hawk (Morgan 1972; Tooker 1970: 29) clans. Ordinarily, two teams from different reservations played the game. According to Frederick Waugh's Cayuga informant, David Jack, deer tallow was applied on snow snakes as special medicine (Waugh (1916:134). Parker also provided detail indicating that the type of medicine used depended on the snow conditions and that the medicine, referred to as *swagum*, was often applied by a snow snake doctor, or *hawazōgas*, who was well paid for his services (Parker 1909:253). The serpent is often represented on other forms of Iroquois material culture such as pipes and is thought to represent a powerful being (Engelbrecht 2003:52–53). Parker also noted considerable missionary effort directed toward discouraging the sport because of the gambling that seemed an integral part of it (Parker 1909:250).

Javelin

Another throwing game recorded among nineteenth-century Iroquois involved the use of javelins, *gā-na'-gā-o*, thrown at a ring as it rolled upon the ground.² It was played between the clan groups or between neighboring communities, who gambled on the outcome.

The javelin was 1.5–1.8 m (5–6 ft) in length by 1.9 cm (.75 in) in diameter and was usually made of hickory or maple. It was finished with care, sharpened at one end, and featured a revolving stripe down the shaft. The ring was about 20 cm (8 in) in diameter, either a hoop or solid like a wheel in form. Sometimes the javelin was

thrown horizontally by placing the forefinger against its end and supporting it with the thumb and second finger; in other cases it was held in the center and thrown with the hand raised above the shoulder.

On either side, from 15 to 30 players were arranged, each with three to six javelins, the number of both depending upon the interest in the game and the time they wished to devote to the contest. The losing team's javelins were forfeited to the winners. Another version of the game entailed throwing javelins made of sumac through the air toward a target, the winner being the one who threw it the farthest (Morgan 1972:299–302).

Moccasin

In the summer of 1773, the leisure activities of the Ojibwa, Wyandot (Wendat), Potawatomi, and Ottawa in Detroit were recorded. While most were present to exchange furs from their year's hunt for various goods, others were simply spending the summer enjoying "fun and frolic" in the form of ball play, footraces, wrestling, evening dog feasts (a religious practice among the Chippewa), and dances of every kind (Connelley 1915:370). One of the games played was "moccasin," which involved two individuals seated face to face on a piece of buffalo hide or deerskin with four new moccasins placed equidistant from one another and a musket ball between them. The first player took the ball and while chanting executed a series of confusing moves to hide the ball under one of the moccasins. The second player had to find the ball, scoring different points depending on whether it was his first or subsequent look. Days might be spent in a match betting pelts acquired during the winter hunt.

Interestingly, a version of this game was played among the nineteenth-century Iroquois as a mourning practice at wakes (Boyle 1900: 38–39). It was to comfort those present and did not involve gambling or excitement, the latter of which was actively discouraged. A pebble or marble, or later a bullet, was hidden in one of four moccasins held on the lap of one of the mourners; opponents in a ritualized fashion would guess which one held the piece. The game would be accompanied by drumming and the



FIGURE 4.9. William Moore of Mattagami Reserve demonstrating the *nabahon* game—spearing moose toe bones threaded on a leather thong—1958. (Archives of Ontario, 10000408, John Macfie fonds; John Macfie, miscellaneous photographs of northern Ontario.)

singing of one of three Wake Songs used only for that purpose, stopping and starting as guesses were made. The game was played throughout the night and ceased in the morning, when all of the components of the game were burned, including the counters distributed to those who had guessed successfully.

Cup-and-Pin

The cup-and-pin game, known as (*nabahon/pepenggunegun*) among the Anishinaabeg, consisted of a bone pin with a number of modified deer phalanges and a piece of hide attached to a thong. The players held the pin in one hand and swung the phalanges, attempting to catch them on the pin (Figure 4.9). Two individuals or groups played the game. The phalanges had their exterior surfaces tapered by cutting and grinding to a cone shape that facilitated stacking. Culin (1907) grouped the game within his category of ring-and-pin games in his landmark inventory of games among indigenous societies in North America. He found it to be relatively widespread throughout the northern portion of North America and noted it was common to Algonquian, Athapaskan, and Siouan language families

(Culin 1907:529–57). It appears, however, not to have been common among Iroquoian-speaking cultures; Culin could not find a single ethnohistoric reference to an Iroquoian analog.

Francis Densmore (1929:117–18) provided a detailed description of the game, noting that usually 10 phalanges were used and that the pin was manufactured from the leg bone of a doe. In at least one case, the pin is known to have been manufactured from a lynx leg bone (Guilday 1963; also Copway 1972 [1850]:48–49). Densmore noted that the game required a great deal of dexterity, since scoring usually meant catching the closest cup to the pin and balancing the rest on top of it.

We examined implements from a cup-and-pin game curated at the Royal Ontario Museum collection (8083). It was donated to the Provincial Museum (later the Royal Ontario Museum) in 1890 by J. E. Wood, who had collected it from the Mississaugas at their New Credit reserve. It consists of a bone pin and seven phalanges. It is likely the same cup-and-pin gear described and illustrated by David Boyle (1891:55–56) in his annual archaeological reports and reproduced in Culin (1907:Figure 701). There are parallel

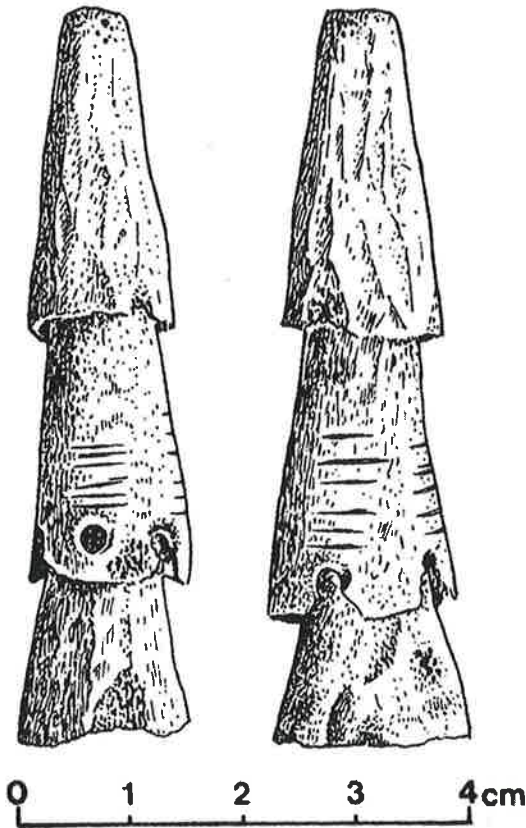


FIGURE 4.10. Late eighteenth-century Ojibwa cup-and-pin game implements recovered from the Bellamy site, southwestern Ontario. (Illustrated by Tim Kenyon, Ferris et al. 1985.)

incisions on the first phalange. This piece often has holes drilled in it that, if skewered by the pin, gains additional points.

In terms of archaeological evidence, modified deer phalanges are relatively common on Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Iroquoian sites and are sometimes referred to as cup-and-pin-variety modified phalanges. These appear to be different from phalanges modified for the cup-and-pin game, however, in that they are not tapered to facilitate stacking. The modified phalanges appear to be either clothing fasteners or bangles that were fastened to clothing, although few bone examples are polished, as might be expected from wear against hide clothing (Engelbrecht 2003:50–51; Fitzgerald 1990:503–04).

Modified phalanges relating to the game, however, have been identified archaeologically. The late eighteenth-century Ojibwa Bellamy site in southwestern Ontario produced six modified deer phalanges that appear to have been used as part of a cup-and-pin game (Figure 4.10; Ferris et al. 1985). The Bellamy pieces, three of which were found stacked, had been clearly whittled into cone shapes. One of the pieces was drilled and scored. A modified deer metacarpal from the site, which displayed notching at the proximal end of the bone (Ferris et al. 1985:9), likely represents the pin. Boyle's set in the Royal Ontario Museum has a hickory stick for a pin. Ferris et al. noted that their notched and drilled cups from the three articulated pieces were exceedingly similar to the specimens described by Boyle, but, unlike his example, the Bellamy piece was drilled in four locations, all four holes being marked by six notches. They attributed the similarity to the close cultural affinity of the Mississauga and the group represented at the Bellamy site. At least four other specimens have been found archaeologically from historic period Anishinaabeg sites in northern Ontario (Ferris et al. 1985:10).

Gambling

Accompanying almost all of these games was gambling, which at times seems to have caused participants and onlookers to abandon rational behavior. One Wendat individual, having played away all his wealth, staked his hair, which the winner cut off close to his scalp when he lost that too. Some even waged the little finger of their hand and, losing the bet, gave it to be cut off, without showing any sign of pain. While the Jesuits could understand exacting this prize from an individual from another nation, they could hardly believe that one would accept this cruelty towards any man of their own country (Thwaites 1896–1901, 16:201).

One game of moccasin at Fort Detroit in 1792 is known to have gotten out of hand, with a Chippewa losing all of his furs and his firearm to a Wyandot. The Chippewa then offered to stake his life on the game, which was initially refused but eventually accepted because of the rage and

indignation of the Chippewa. When the Chippewa lost again, he immediately fled toward the fort, with the Wyandot, affronted by his cowardice, in pursuit. He eventually caught the runaway and plunged a knife into his heart, thereby killing him. This necessitated a joint meeting of the two councils to negotiate an accommodation. Despite numerous offers of payment by the Wyandot and even intervention by the British, the affair was only settled at the funeral of the Chippewa man when the Wyandot man, moved by the words of the mother of the Chippewa man, accepted the responsibility of caring for her and her grandchildren for the rest of his life (Connelley 1915:371–73).

In terms of material culture stakes, losses might entail as many as 30 wampum collars, each having 1,000 beads (Thwaites 1896–1901, 17:77, 205). When losing, bettors further staked tobacco pouches, robes, shoes, and leggings, simply all that they possessed. Ojibwa playing the moccasin game were even known to wager their children (Vennum 1994:108). In the game of dish, beads, tobacco pouches, robes, shoes, and leggings were bet. The Jesuits witnessed such heavy losses, including a case in which individuals returned to their village barefoot one winter from a game, having lost their moccasins at a time when there was nearly three feet of snow. They noted, however, a cheerful disposition regardless of the outcome.

While a regular and accepted practice, the loss of all personal material goods occasionally led to dire consequences, especially if the person suffered from mental illness. The Jesuits recorded a case, for example, where a man, having lost his beaver robe and a collar of 400 wampum beads at a game of straws, hanged himself from a tree rather than face his relatives. He had attempted suicide before, but a little girl had caught him in the act. When asked why he had done it, he replied, "I do not know, but someone within me seems always to be saying, 'hang yourself, hang yourself'" (Thwaites 1896–1901, 10:81). The Jesuits argued that gambling never led to anything good, noting that the Wendat themselves remarked that it was almost the sole cause of assaults and murders in their country.

It was no different among the nineteenth-century Iroquois. Lewis Henry Morgan (1972: 293) observed that the practice was never rejected by their religious practitioners but in fact was encouraged, frequently leading to the most reckless indulgence. He stated that people often gambled away all of their possessions and that the excitement and eagerness with which they both participated and watched was at times uncontrollable.

Anthony Aveni (2010) has argued that gambling in these societies should be viewed as a social leveler, where wagering aided in the redistribution of material wealth and that general parity of talent and skill ensured stability between nations—the loss of one's goods today might be regained, at least in part, during the next game. In Precontact times, a prized garment or weapon that was lost could likely be replaced, and the more that gambling thrived, the lower the odds that anyone would accumulate too much personal property.

Conclusions

One of the most interesting aspects of games played among Great Lakes societies is their connection with curing and mourning ceremonies and their inherent structure involving redistribution of material goods. Much of the curing seems to have been centered on the effort to honor the Creator by playing these games and to set things right spiritually for the individual or community. The games were also played in preburial wake and commemoration contexts. Ventur has noted that institutionalized mortuary games, particularly wake games, are predominantly an Iroquoian–Algonquian phenomenon, mostly deriving from an Iroquoian origin (Ventur 1980b:84). Their cultural and spatial proximity, perhaps due to common ancestry, along with the influences of Iroquoian agricultural commodities, led to widespread sharing of ideologically based practice; they were sacred games (Pfeiffer et al. 2014). While Culin (1907:339) considered the moccasin game derivative of the western hidden-ball game, Ventur notes that its association with funeral wakes is restricted to Northern Iroquoians, Eastern Algonquians, and

the Delaware, where the moccasin game became exclusively associated with mortuary rites (Speck 1937:99–101; Ventur 1980b:86). Whatever the context, the outcomes of these types of games were based on more than chance; it was a matter of successfully propitiating the spirits.

Although infrequently found in mortuary contexts, the presence of dice and dish gaming pieces in Iroquois graves at late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Seneca sites perhaps links these games to the afterlife. The contexts of dozens of purported gaming pieces on ancestral Wendat sites, however, are predominantly middens, pit features, and plow-zone deposits. It is becoming evident that the interpretation of the role of gaming in these societies relies far more heavily on ethnographic rather than archaeological data.

Many of these ceremonial games and the associated gambling serve a number of important social, economic, and ritual purposes. These include redistributing funeral wealth, along with the personal property of the deceased; promoting unity among the living by reinforcing friendship and kinship; providing comfort to either the ill or bereaved survivors; and honoring the dead in burying their favorite possessions, including game pieces, with them (Salter 1972b:189; Ventur 1980b:87–88).

The excitement and loyalty to the teams, displayed by both participant and onlooker and enhanced by aggressive competition in ball-games and other activities, engendered group solidarity among phratries, communities, and even nations, much like the dance competitions

at powwows today. Games like lacrosse and javelin, with their obvious benefits for honing hunting and warrior skills, seem to have been ubiquitous among groups that existed in climates of endemic conflict involving blood and honor feuds. Seneca lacrosse legends even describe the decapitation of losers, reminiscent of the supposed sacrifice of losing ballplayers in Mesoamerica (Vennum 1994:312–16).

Gambling on the part of both participants and the community also promoted integration of men and women and represented a culturally acceptable way for nonparticipants to express their allegiance to the team. In this way, regardless of the outcome of the match or the wager, the objective of identification and solidarity with the team was achieved, and people were able to return home seemingly undisturbed by a negative outcome. Simply, it was never about winning or losing in either the game or the wager; it was about rooting for one's team. This is not surprising at all and remains a part of life for both indigenous and nonindigenous communities today. All of this was ably captured in the famous Tin Pan Alley song penned by Jack Norworth and Albert von Tilzer, entitled "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." The protagonist, Katie Casey, was baseball mad, had the fever and had it bad, and wanted just to root for the hometown crew, wagering every cent she had on the game. The sentiment expressed in the chorus of "I don't care if I never get back, let me root, root, root for the home team" is not in need of "situating" in a theoretical context; it's simply tribalism born in the ancient past.

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Notes

1. Culin (1907:647 ff) refers to this game as "double ball."
2. Culin (1907:420 ff) uses the term "hoop and pole" to refer to this game.