

*Lacrosse Talk – September 2005*  
*British Columbia Lacrosse Association*  
*By Ian S. Robertson*

### **History of “Canada’s Game” perhaps most colourful in sport history**

A variation on a field sport early British and French explorers saw Indians playing more than 200 years ago has become more and more popular in recent years.

The true origins are lost in time, but historians say North America's oldest sport is lacrosse, which Canada Post featured on two commemorative stamps over the past 37 years.

They also say it developed around the 1400s into a religious rite, played to celebrate the life their creator had given them.

It was also played to help resolve arguments between villages or tribes without bloodshed, to help heal the sick, ensure that young men remained healthy and strong - and help them practice for war. The winners were declared to have found favour for their argument with the Great Spirit.

Some Indians referred to it as "The Creator's Game." The Cherokee referred to the sport as "da-nah-wah'uwdi," or "the little brother of war."

Players could number as high as 800, and goals ranged from between 170 and 550 metres to sometimes as much as nine kilometres apart, with competitions lasting as many as three days, between sun-up and sundown.

The rules were somewhat hazy in those days and when players couldn't get near the deerskin hide ball, to score points by hitting a designated rock or tree, they would go after opponents, using their curved sticks as weapons. In case they hesitated, women used to beat them with switches, egging them on to "play" harder. Some tribes used two sticks, one in each hand, and women sometimes played against each other separately from the men.

It was not uncommon for the games to end with participants left seriously injured, even dead.

One wily chief, the famous Pontiac, even used the game as subterfuge to attack a fur trading and military post.

Under the guise of a friendly game, he organized his teams outside the post on Mackinac Island, at the junction of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron in 1763. As the unsuspecting white traders and soldiers watched what they believed to be friendly sport, the Indian women passed their men tomahawks and the players turned on the fort, wiping out most of the occupants.

The Algonquins called the game "baggataway," while the Iroquois Nation called it "teewaraathon."

Well-organized and with clearer rules, teams were generally limited to between 12 and 15 players. The dimensions and size of the playing fields were set out, with goals usually about 40 metres apart.

The name "lacrosse" is believed to have derived from early French explorers being reminded of a bishop's crozier - or cross - when they saw the sticks used in the game. Hence "la crosse" in French replaced all other names in the game which the newcomers began to play.

Alternately, the more favoured theory is that the name came from a field hockey game they played called "jeu de la crosse."

Either way, it caught on with the newcomers, after a Jesuit missionary, Father Jean de Brebeuf, wrote about the Huron Indians playing the game in 1683 in present-day southern Ontario.

However, since their version was a bit unwieldy, and a tad mortally risky, their rules were abandoned for more gentlemanly pursuits.

Starting in the early 1800s, the number of players and size of the fields changed, depending on where the game was played.

In 1844, the Olympic Club of Montreal organized a team to play a match against an Indian team. The first written rules approaching the modern version of the game were created by the Montreal Lacrosse Club, which was formed by city resident William George Beers in 1856.

The rough edges were worked out 11 years later by Beers, who went on to become the most renowned dentist in Canada.

A strong nationalist, he believed cricket the most popular summer sport in Canada in the third quarter of the 19th century, did not deserve the title since the game had been brought over from Great Britain.

The world's first official game was reportedly played in 1867 at Upper Canada College in Toronto. The Montreal club's team lost to a team fielded by the Toronto Cricket Club, with a score of 3-to-1.

Six years earlier, Beers finalized a uniform code, the National Archives of Canada states on its Web site, although some historians use a later reference.

Beers set out 12 as the number of players on each opposing team, the type of curved, webbed stick to be used, duration of play, various players, positions, a shorter length for a playing field, permissible point-scoring, and penalty infractions.

He also had the hair-stuffed deerskin balls replaced by hard rubber ones. His rules were adopted in Kingston, ON in 1867 at a conference he organized, which led to the Canadian National Lacrosse Association being created. By then, 80 lacrosse clubs had been formed across Canada.

The following year, Beers wrote: "If the Republic of Greece was indebted to the Olympic Games; if England has cause to bless the name of cricket; so may Canada be proud of Lacrosse.

"It has raised a young manhood throughout the Dominion to active, healthy exercise; it has originated a popular feeling in favour of physical exercise; and has, perhaps, done more than anything else to invoke a sentiment of patriotism among young men in Canada; and if this sentiment is desirable abroad, surely it is at home." This principle prompted Beers' peers in the sports world to adopt a motto for the first national sport governing body: "Our Country - Our Game."

A Montreal publisher produced the first book on the sport in 1869. Lacrosse: The National Game of Canada was written by Beers and illustrated with posed photos of players by the famous Notman Gallery.

Two years earlier, when present-day Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick united in a Confederation to form the Dominion of Canada, a team of Caughnawaga Indians from near Montreal went to England and played lacrosse for Queen Victoria. The publicity attracted a great deal of attention and teams were soon formed in several large cities.

In 1876, Beers toured the British Isles with a lacrosse team. The English Lacrosse Union was organized in 1892.

Men were less interested than women, who formed the majority of teams in England late in the 19th century. The reason given is that lacrosse was considered the perfect sport during the spring, among women who played field hockey each autumn.

The game quickly spread to Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Although popular here, it didn't catch on quickly in the United States.

American Indians had almost stopped playing in the northern U. S. by the late 1860s, until the game was revived by the Onondaga tribe, influenced by friends in St. Regis tribe in Canada. The Onondagas called the game "dehuntsigwa'es," or "men hit a rounded object."

Whites began playing in northern New York state in 1868 and the first collegiate team south of the border was created at New York University in 1877 - 10 years after the first collegiate team was formed in this country.

Contemporary newspaper reports quoted attendance at the games often reached 5,000 in the 1880s, sometimes as much as 10,000. The press constantly referred to lacrosse as "the national sport of Canada." While the Indian version of the game was gradually toned down, for many years it was played much more roughly than in the "Canadian" style developed by Europeans. The Six Nations of Iroquois played competitively against other countries, including Canada, and even toured Europe.

Although the native version had a special following, gambling began to erode the sport, culminating 105 years ago when the Choctaw were banned from playing in Oklahoma after state officials discovered players bent on winning at any cost in order to reap greater rewards, had added lead weights to their sticks in order to crack opponent's heads.

Beers, the "father of lacrosse," claimed the game was officially adopted as Canada's national sport, but Parliament didn't pass appropriate legislation during his lifetime, although some claim long-lost government records that predate Confederation would set the record straight. If only they could be found.

Born in 1841, Beers died in 1900 at the age of only 59.

#### **LACROSSE BRIEFLY STARRED AT OLYMPICS**

Lacrosse was first played during an Olympic Games 101 years ago in St. Louis, MO, then four years later in 1908 at London.

With only three countries on the field, Canada's teams won both gold medals, defeating rivals from England and the United States.

Canada, which sent its first official delegation to the games in 1904, emerged with a gold medal for lacrosse. The game was dropped from the competition list however, when the next Olympics were held in Europe, where lacrosse was barely known. It became a demonstration sport during the Olympics of 1928, 1932, and 1948, and was an exhibition tournament at the games held in Los Angeles in 1980.

Although teams play today in dozens of countries around the world, organizers say there are insufficient national governing bodies for lacrosse to become a competitive Olympic sport. By the First World War of

1914-18, the popularity of lacrosse had begun to wane in favour of another popular game, baseball. But 30 years earlier, lacrosse had already fallen into some disfavour with sports fans who preferred amateur athletics to professional play, which lacrosse relied on. The battle of wills raged on for a decade when, in 1890, the amateur lacrosse organization split into two groups, with professionals under the National Lacrosse Union and amateurs under the Canadian Lacrosse Association. A second professional league, the Dominion Lacrosse Union, was formed several years later.

In 1908, a player could earn \$100 per season, no small change in those days. Stars could make 10 times that amount, some even more.

That year, Cyclone Taylor made almost \$2,000 playing for the Salmonbellies of New Westminster, BC. In 1917, while Newsy Lalonde made more than \$3,000 playing for a Vancouver team.

The battling dragged on for another eight years, with some teams being snubbed. In 1925, organizers across the country regrouped and rekindled the Canadian Amateur Lacrosse Association, with the entire sport operating under one banner.

Conscious of competition for fans brought about by the popularity of hockey, Canadians developed an indoor version of the game known as box lacrosse or "boxla," almost 70 years ago.

It is played with six people per team on the floor at any time during a game - five players and one goalie - the same as modern hockey.

Lacrosse was never the same.

By the mid-1930s, box lacrosse had become so popular across the country that it had replaced field lacrosse as the most popular form of the sport.

The first indoor world lacrosse championship was held two years ago.

Unknown in some U.S. states, field lacrosse began to make a comeback with the creation in 1967 of the International Lacrosse Federation and the world championship tournament that year.

That year the late Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, a First World War fighter pilot and an accomplished lacrosse player in his youth, attempted to have the sport formally declared a National Game in the House of Commons.

Pearson suggested it be designated the National Summer Game and hockey should be declared a National Winter Game.

### **LACROSSE DECLARED OFFICIAL NATIONAL GAME 11 YEARS AGO**

Finally, 84 years after Beers died, the game was officially sanctioned in Parliament.

After Nelson Riis, a New Democratic Party MP from Kamloops, BC, introduced a private members bill in the House of Commons to recognize hockey as the national sport, Bill C-212 was passed on May 12, 1994 with an amendment declaring it to be the national winter sport and lacrosse to be the national summer sport.

Despite this laudable move, lacrosse today is mainly played in southern Ontario and British Columbia.

However, many observers and participants regard the game as more of a continuation of history, since it is less popular than hockey, football, baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, golf, and bowling.

In 1901, one year after the death of Beers, Lord Minto, the governor-general of Canada, donated a silver cup as the symbol of the senior amateur championship.

The Minto Cup became the trophy of professional leagues. In 1910, Sir Donald Mann, chief architect of the Canadian Northern Railway (CNR), donated a gold cup as the chief prize for the national amateur senior champion.

Today, the Minto Cup is the top trophy in Canadian junior lacrosse, while the Mann Cup is the championship prize for the best Canadian senior team in box lacrosse.

While the game has experienced more ups and downs than a "glass-jawed boxer," lacrosse since the 1990s has grown to a participation level involving more than 100,000 players registered with the Canadian Lacrosse Association.

It recognized four versions of the game: Box; Men's Field, a contact sport during which players wear protective equipment; Women's Field, a non-contact sport; and Inter-Lacrosse, a modern non-contact version that stresses skill among a wide range of young athletes to help develop conditioning, co-ordination, team play and respect for opponents.

Meanwhile, professional players are enjoying the insurgence of the National Lacrosse League (NLL), with teams based across North America, from Toronto to Anaheim.

The league was formed as the Eagle Pro Box Lacrosse League in 1986 with four U.S.- based teams.

In 1997, the Ontario Raiders (based at Hamilton's Copps Coliseum) became the first Canadian team to play in the newly-named NLL, which now also includes the Toronto Rock (formerly the Ontario Raiders), Vancouver Ravens, Calgary Roughnecks, and the new expansion team, the Edmonton Rush.

Today, the league is more successful than it's ever been, with a steadily increasing annual attendance, including a record average league attendance of 10,400 fans per game in 2005. In the championship final game on May 14, an NLL record 19,432 fans packed the Air Canada Centre in Toronto to watch the Rock defeat the Arizona Sting 19-13.

### **LACROSSE STAMPS**

Canada issued its first of two stamps featuring lacrosse on July 3, 1968, one year after Pearson's attempt to have it declared the official summer sport of this country.

Designed by James E. Aldridge, the 5-cent commemorative (Scott #483) shows two modern players in the foreground, paying tribute to the game's origins with the image of an Indian player in the background. The historic figure is printed in red, the two modern players in black, all against a deep yellow background. The British American Bank Note Co. in Ottawa used two-colour photogravure and one-colour steel printing to produce 24 million of the stamps, with marginal inscriptions printed on the four corners of each pane of 50.

Typical of most BABNC perforating at the time, the lacrosse stamps were issued with 10-gauge all-round "comb" perms - vertical and horizontal holes are punched during one operation and are identifiable by the lack of overlapping holes on the corners.

The rougher gauge perms made the stamps more difficult to separate than 11.8-by- 11.8 or 12.4-by-11.9 "line perf" versions - created by rows of holes punched separately, often recognizable by uneven holes at the corners.

The finer-gauge perforating tools were used by BABNC's rivals, the Canadian Bank Note Company.

The lacrosse stamps, therefore, are difficult to find with sound perforations.

On May 20, 1994, the second lacrosse stamp was issued.

Produced as part of a series for the 15th Commonwealth Games, which were held that year in Victoria, BC, the 43-cent commemorative reproduced photographs of players in action, with the "Queen's Baton" depicted on the left.

The stamp (SC #1518) was designed by David Coates and Roderick C.J. Roodenburg.

Leigh-Mardon Pty Limited, an Australian firm which produced Canadian stamps for about a year before contracts were rewritten to favour companies in this country, used five lithographic transfer colours plus gold foil stamping for "CANADA" and "43." The lacrosse stamp was printed se-tenant on panes of 25, on stock supplied by Coated Papers Limited. The second stamp shows lawn bowling in play.

As always, nicely-cancelled se-tenant pairs are not easy to find.