**Lacrosse: A History of the Game**


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This excellent history of lacrosse is a *must* for any sport historian wanting to truly understand the history of sport in the United States and Canada. It provides a vivid picture of this fascinating sport that, for the past century and a half, has been played in specific locations by particular groups of people. It adds a new dimension to our understanding of sport in both countries. In fact, I would argue that it is impossible to truly understand Canadian sport history without understanding the role of lacrosse. It also adds a different perspective to American sport history. Donald M. Fisher has provided a meticulously researched and highly readable account of the history of the various forms of the game. More than that, he has achieved his objective of presenting “the history of lacrosse within broad cultural and social contexts” (p. 3). The changes in the game are placed within the context of overarching cultural and social events.

In five chronologically organized chapters, Fisher provides the game’s history from its roots in native American culture to its spread across the United States in the 1990s. More importantly, he provides four separate but interrelated histories—those of native Americans, white Americans, Canadians, and women. His strength lies in his ability to explore the complex relationships between the different histories—and the histories are different—while maintaining the independence of each, no small task. It is this ability to present an extremely complex story in a fashion that is both readable and understandable that makes this work so impressive. What he does particularly well is explore the relationships of Native Americans to the different forms of lacrosse: the elite-based field lacrosse of the strongholds on the East Coast, and the very different history of the game in Canada. Providing a link to all these histories was the ever-present problem of violence, a problem that was addressed by every group but in different ways. In so doing, Fisher explores different concepts of masculinity. Another unifying factor was his explanation for the limited development of the game. He maintains that it was the invention of the plastic lacrosse stick that broke the bottleneck created by the Native American’s control of
the production of wooden sticks. Whether the technological change was a cause or effect was not effectively answered.

At another level, this history reveals much about the nature of history and the necessary ingredients of “good” history. Because of the limited appeal of lacrosse and the paucity of research, especially in the United States, it was possible for the author to consult all the secondary sources (his bibliographic essay, pp. 349-354, is exemplary) and all known primary sources, although his command of the American primary sources was better than his command of the Canadian sources. In fact, his use of primary and secondary sources lies at the heart of some significant differences in approach. His work on lacrosse in the United States is solidly based in primary material. This is reflected in chapter 2 on the early development of the game, where 109 of the 139 footnotes are primary sources. This, in part, reflects the paucity of academic research on the game. His work on Canada is exactly the opposite. In chapter 1, 25 of 100 footnotes on Canada are of primary source material. Thus, his work on Canada is different from that on the United States. This is reflected in his interpretation of the Canadian scene—nowhere near as strong as his understanding of the American. Despite these differences, this is an excellent history. However, I do believe that it could have been strengthened by trying to provide some focus to the “cultural” elements of the book. There are no references to literature on cultural production and reproduction, an area of active research in the past few years. An exploration of the theoretical literature would have provided a central thread to his “cultural” analysis. This is particularly so when considering the Canadian case. He never examines the important fact that lacrosse in Canada is still played in the towns and villages where it was played in 1900. This, to me, is a critical factor that, incidentally, Canadian sport historians have never really been able to explain (present reviewer included). Why was it that lacrosse survived in these limited locations, defying all the changes that took place in sport during the twentieth century? If we are truly to understand the development of sport, these difficult questions must be answered. I feel that an exploration of the theoretical literature on cultural production and reproduction would have provided some guidance.

One of the most interesting insights, which raises basic questions about sport itself, comes from a single throwaway paragraph. In 1986, a new form of lacrosse—“intercrosse” or “soft” lacrosse—was introduced by the Federation Quebecoise de Crosse (FQC, the Quebec Lacrosse Federation). By 1991, the game boasted twenty-two national federations. In 1999, there were half a million children in all 50 states of the United States playing the game. Additionally, it was played in approximately 40 countries. Boys and girls played together on mixed teams. Even at international competitions, the players from different countries played on “mixed” teams. The game