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It seems that none of the early travelers among the native American Indian population – mainly missionaries – took the trouble of finding out the original name for the peculiar ballgame, played with netted sticks that was played by the Indians. Instead a French missionary called it *lacrosse*, and that's the name that the game goes by in its modern form. The game of lacrosse is played in a constantly growing number of countries, with an increasing number of registered players, and with national and international bodies organizing cups and series. We will probably have to wait, though, for a return of lacrosse to the Olympic Games; it was an Olympic sport in St. Louis games in 1904 as well as in London 1908. This editor came across lacrosse as a women's game played in the colleges of Cambridge, England; the rules of the women's game differs substantially from the men's lacrosse, of which there in tiurn are two forms, outdoor, field lacrosse, and indoor, box lacrosse. The classic academic study of the early history of lacrosse is Thomas Vennum's anthropological work *American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War* (Johns Hopkins University Press). Halvdan Haugsbakken has read Vennum's book, which is a fascinating historical account, mixing traditional academic prose with narratives and interviews.

## An important study and a good read

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*Thomas Vennum***American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War**

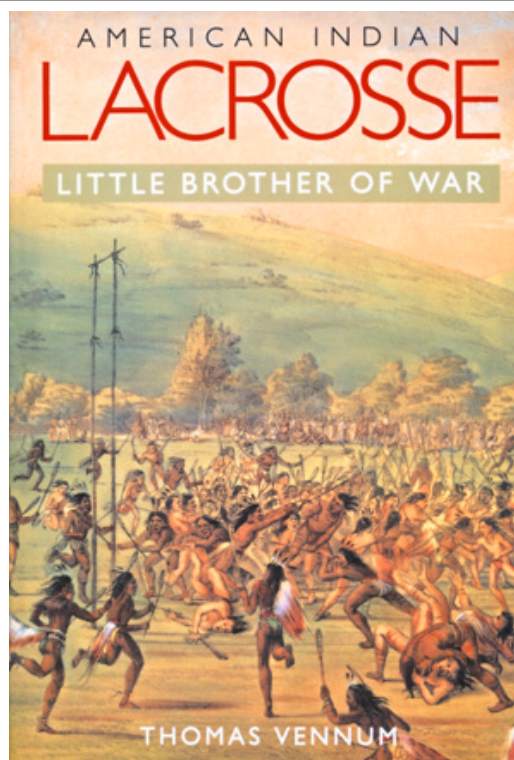
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This book, *American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War*, written by the American senior ethnomusicologist Thomas Vennum, describes the social and cultural development of the Native American Indian sport of lacrosse. *Little Brother of War* was first published in 1994, but is now, one and half decades later, available in paperback edition for the global audiences. The paperback edition is published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, and contains roughly 350 pages distributed across 16 interesting chapters. The book also holds a rich overview with interesting pictures and graphic illustrations of lacrosse. *Little Brother of War* is a well-crafted example on how to carry out academic research on sports, as it obtains the prime objective of scholarly work; thorough cultural contextualisation – a project in which Vennum excels.



For those not familiar with lacrosse, it is described as a team-sport played on a sport field similar to the one used in soccer. Lacrosse has been played by Native American Indians for centuries, and the first games on record are believed to have been organised and developed as early as the 12th century. The earliest versions organised as much as 500 players and was a mass display of Indian culture. Modern lacrosse on the other hand, consists of ten players

in each of two teams, where each player is armed with a crosse or a lacrosse stick, helmet and body protective covering. The head of the lacrosse stick is strung with loose netting that is designed to hold the lacrosse ball. In terms of team tactics, the objective is to use the racquet to catch, carry and pass the ball in order to score on the opponent's goal, whereas the defensive aim is to defend attacking team from scoring. Dispossessing the opponent for the control of the ball through the use of stick checking, body contact or positioning, is also a part of the game.

Vennum's work is essentially an historical and deconstructionist account of lacrosse, beginning with descriptions of how the sport was first practiced by the Indians themselves, the first European observations and their gradual involvement, to finally accounting for the complex professional organised manner in which lacrosse is played out today. In so doing, Vennum covers a timeframe spanning over 350 years in his book. Before European involvement lacrosse had great ritual importance. Vennum shows how the game upheld the prime function seen every in ritual on the sporting planet – preventing societies from falling apart. Early games were played to settle inter-tribal disputes, and therefore were essential for holding larger tribal communities together. In relation to the first European observations of lacrosse, this again is described in terms of the classic mosaic seen in so many cultural anthropological discourses on the Western encounters with the “rest”: missionary accounts. Vennum's portrayal of the French missionary Francois Joseph Le Mercier's meeting with the Indians are illuminating for how the so-called West failed in understanding and culturally respect “the rest”. Lacrosse was for the European audience introduced as “tennis”, due to the superficial similarities. In 1637, however, when the French Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf saw Iroquois tribesmen play, he named what he saw lacrosse. Some say the name originates from the French term for field hockey, *le jeu de la crosse*; in any case the Indian sport has never been known by its native name but by a name given by outsiders, namely the Europeans.

However, it is the game's ritual significance, and it's sometimes bloody and violent attributes, that makes interesting reading. Vennum depicts lacrosse as a ritual that lasted and involved many individuals beyond the duration of the game itself, a reminder that sporting rituals are full of small pre- and post-practices taking place outside the main sporting event that require consideration. In other words, lacrosse is a ritual nerve going deep into the American Indian society; Vennum devotes time and space to such details. Lacrosse was played by men, women supported their men, and medicine men acted as coaches. Vennum shows how players and supporters before match-days were involved in practices that are commonly observed in sporting rituals such as singing, dancing, and soliciting of divine support. Lacrosse would also act as a symbolic prelude to war. Players decorated their bodies with paint and charcoal and their sticks or stick racks with objects representing qualities desired in the game. This is true of all rituals; it can not be considered a prominent ritual if there are no strict norms and values for what is allowed and not. Taboos told what players could and could not eat before a game, and the medicine man performed rituals preparing players and their sticks. Players would also dress in ceremonial costumes and perform special dances, and in addition sacrifices were held.

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Vennum's writing style is an alluring blend of hygienic academic analysis and historical accounts, narratives and interviews, a style used deliberately throughout the book. As reader, you are in one chapter introduced to the familiar academic genre of scientific writing, while in the following the tone is different. Suddenly, the author swaps voice, and you get the feeling of reading a historical novel of some sort. This interchange between two completely different styles, attributes to break down what otherwise could have been a 20 hours monologue explaining lacrosse from a standardised check-list; in other words, this is quality writing. But Vennum is a slow starter; it takes some time before he gets into the really interesting analysis. I initially feared that *Little Brother of War* would develop into a self-absorbing everlasting saga, where the researcher states his passion for the lacrosse stick and do not consider the interests of the reader. Vennum does not fall into this trap, and his book is a compelling journey into the historical exploration of an old team sport.

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