

For the *Sga-Du-Gi* (Community): Modern Day Cherokee Stickball

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They say *sga-du-gi*, and that's the community. Being a part of a community and doing things that way. (That's) the most important part to me because everybody's working together; everybody's seeing each other and helping each other when they can.

—George, 31, Cherokee stickball player

One is likely to stumble upon a centuries-old tradition tucked away in the mountains of western North Carolina on any given October day. A game once known simply as Indian ball, or in the Cherokee language, *anetso*, is now more commonly referred to as stickball. This particular October day in 2016 is warmer than usual. It is the week of the 104th Annual Cherokee Indian Fair and most of the community is out to partake in the festivities, from food to entertainment, but more importantly, to socialize. The sun is just about to set as two groups of shirtless, barefoot men march, seemingly out of nowhere, onto the open, unmarked field surrounded by hundreds of spectators. The only signifier of sport on the field are the pairs of saplings on each end, the goals. There is a handful of tourists, but the crowd is mostly native to this land, members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Babies cry, mothers and fathers quibble, and children engage in play, already bored with the lack of action.

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The crowd snaps to attention as the war call starts, the loud echoing sound that signals that one team is challenging the other. The teams slowly, but purposefully, march toward each other, three or four steps with each whoop, and meet in the center of the field. Exactly what is happening is not obvious, but it becomes clear that the teams are sizing each other up and pairing off, man versus man. Once the ball is thrown up in the air, like a basketball at tipoff, there is no structure other than the objective: getting the ball through the goalpost. The first team to do this twelve times wins. Wrestling and fighting are not only allowed, but expected. It is not uncommon to see blood. We hear the sound of handmade sticks cracking against each other as players jockey for position and attempt to pick up the ball, about the size of a golf ball, with the webbed cups at the end of the stick. The crowd oohs and ahhs when a big hit is delivered.

The game is nonstop and a former participant in the game helps the spectators follow the action. The announcer is not only narrating the action but also calling out individual players, occasionally adding a quirky anecdote about a particular player and his home community. Each team has “drivers” carrying switches, this game’s version of referees. These team representatives enforce the unwritten rules of play and make sure the game is played in an appropriate and respectable way.

Participants play for either their local community or their wives’ communities. These teams represent two communities within the Cherokee Indian Reservation. The action slows slightly as the players become fatigued, but this is an intense game and the Big Cove team begins to relinquish its lead to the Hummingbirds. The Hummingbirds team is comprised of players who have moved from community to community or live off the reservation and don’t necessarily align themselves with a specific community. The Hummingbirds are within one point of winning the contest, and one of the team’s younger players runs swiftly through the goals for the game-winning point. The crowd erupts, and the teams meet in the middle again to acknowledge one another. Then the spectators quickly disperse, returning to fair activities while family members console or congratulate their players.

Some argue this game is merely an exhibition for tourists, no longer the traditional ritual that settled arguments and prevented wars in years past. Importantly, however, many elements that accompany *anetso* take place away from the public field, such as the medicine man’s guidance of the team, the ball dance, and the brotherhood that these teams develop. Cherokee stickball may no longer directly correlate with war, but it still has a substantial meaning to the players and community. Building on the scholarly research conducted on stickball’s role in Cherokee society,¹ as well as its reinforcement of ritualistic and religious behaviors,² this study examines the experiences of current and former stickball players on the Cherokee Indian reservation in western North Carolina (hereafter “the Reservation”). Our purpose was to explore their reasons for playing and the game’s larger meaning as part of their Cherokee identity and culture.

CHEROKEE STICKBALL

Traditionally, stickball was a war game used to settle disputes and is still regarded as a surrogate for war.³ Under its rules “almost everything short of murder is allowable.”⁴ Indeed, in 1948, the violence of stickball led *True Magazine* to feature a story titled “Homicide, A Sport.”⁵ The field was marked off by a medicine man at a location between two competing townships.⁶ Now the competition area is a designated open space approximately the size of a football field in the center of the Cherokee Reservation. Two tree saplings are placed into the ground at opposite ends of the field to mark the goals. Team size could range from six to sixty, but more commonly now consists of eleven to twelve players.⁷ Stickball is similar to the other racket and ball games played by indigenous and Native American communities which eventually became lacrosse.⁸ However, while the stickball players of the northern and western tribes use just one stick, Cherokee stickball players carry two sticks about three feet long and clasp the ball between the webbed cups on the ends.⁹ Stickball season is in the fall and players only wear shorts, with no shoes, shirts, or padding.¹⁰

The cultural aspects lying beneath the surface of Cherokee stickball have intrigued outsiders to dig deeper into its meaning and significance.¹¹ Ethnologist James Mooney, who lived among the Cherokees in western North Carolina and studied their culture in the 1880s, was the first to comprehensively note the complexities of Cherokee stickball.¹² Stickball is believed to have been developed centuries before Mooney’s visit, however. He himself writes that Native Americans “shaped the pliant hickory staff with his knife and flint and twisted the net of the bear sinew ages before visions of a western world began to float through the brain of the Italian dreamer.”¹³ As Mooney explains, although the stickball game had been observed by others across the country it had been only written about as a game, without any mention of the secret ceremonies and incantations.¹⁴ From a game he witnessed in September 1889, Mooney describes the mythology, training, taboo, dancing, scratching, and interworking of the entire stickball experience. He later concluded that “the older people still cling to their ancient rites and sacred traditions, but the dance and the ballplay wither and the Indian day is nearly spent.”¹⁵

The 1962 dissertation of Raymond Fogelson offers another rich ethnographic account of Cherokee stickball. In the late 1950s, Fogelson spent two summers as a member of a field team led by Dr. John Gulick. Sponsored by the University of North Carolina’s Institute for Research in Social Science, this project aimed to collect information about the contemporary life of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. In 1958, towards the end of his second summer with the group, Fogelson determined that the complexity of stickball needed further investigation after he witnessed a pre-game stickball ritual. First noting the game is “an exhibition ostensibly performed as a tourist attraction,” Fogelson then explains that the game is much more than athletic activity and that some aspects still served purposes greater than that of attracting tourist dollars. Fogelson too noted that once-common parallel activities such as dancing, marching to the field, and formalized betting had disappeared.¹⁶ His concern for the erosion of the ceremonialism of the game stemmed from what he perceived as a

“growing disbelief in the efficacy of the native conjuring practices.” These conjuring activities included rituals and ceremonies where medical and magical spells were performed to ensure victory and weaken the rival team.¹⁷

Most recently, Michael Zogry has discussed the ceremonial and cultural complex of stickball in *Anetso, the Cherokee Ball Game* (2010). Despite the vast amount of scholarship around the Cherokee, Zogry found that the prevailing works specific to stickball were limited to Mooney’s article and Fogelson’s unpublished doctoral dissertation.¹⁸ Introduced to stickball through his studies under Fogelson, Zogry observed, photographed, and videotaped stickball in Cherokee late in the 1990s. He describes this ceremonial complex as a “group or cycle of individual ritual activities performed in a standardized sequence as parts of a single ritual event.”¹⁹ With his main focus on how the Cherokee people represented their cultural identity by participating in stickball, he argues that theoretically, Cherokee stickball is difficult to categorize exclusively as either game or ritual.²⁰

Zogry further noted that while the game may only be played once a year during the week of the Cherokee Indian Fair, the knowledge of the game persists and thus it could once again grow larger in popularity. Pointing out that tourists attracted to the game often do not know what they are witnessing, making it easier to view it as simply a game, Zogry suggests that scholars who deem the game to be on the decline may have it wrong. He finds such claims of decline problematic because of the colonialist ideology that perpetrates notions of the degeneration of First Nations’ cultures and people. In contrast, Zogry concludes that through stickball, the community still cultivates, maintains, and achieves identity.²¹

SPORT IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

In North America, indigenous populations have participated in sport for as long as history has been recorded and, many believe, long before. When an anthology of women in sport was compiled in the early 1980s, fittingly, the first chapter centered on North American Indian women’s involvement in ball games. In nearly every community or tribe a different variation of a ball game was played.²² Anthropologist Kendall Blanchard studied how sport and games shape the culture of the Mississippi Choctaw in 1981, finding that sports capture Choctaw values, ideology, and behaviors.²³ More recently, Katherine Brooks has discussed Toka, an all-female stick and ball game similar to Cherokee stickball that is thousands of years old, and how it has been revived for recreational purposes as well as a way to battle obesity and diabetes. Toka even has a place in Tohono O’odham folklore, further evidence of the intertwining of the sport in the tribe’s heritage. Toka also resembles Cherokee stickball in that it has a ceremonial context lacking in other mainstream sports, and it is recognized that these games are played not only for the present tribal members, but also for future generations.²⁴

Thomas Vennum’s 1994 book *American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War* thoroughly explored how the stick and ball game became known as modern lacrosse and was heralded as an important volume on the cultural history of sport.²⁵ In the

late-nineteenth century non-Natives appropriated the game for commercial purposes. Native stickball was paraded as a primitive sideshow, while opposing non-Native lacrosse clubs formed.²⁶ Another ironic outcome of this appropriation occurred in 2010, when the Iroquois Nationals lacrosse team was unable to play in the Federation of International Lacrosse World Championship tournament after British authorities refused entry visas to the tournament location because the team carried Haudenosaunee passports issued by the Onondaga Nation. In a public expression of their sovereignty, the Iroquois Nationals insisted on the recognition of their tribal passports instead of obtaining United States and Canadian passports, but unfortunately, there was not enough time for the various governments to come to an agreement. While the competitive Nationals missed out on the chance to medal in the world games, they gained respect for their tribe and the entire indigenous population.²⁷

With indigenous communities more present in Canada, both as a percentage of the population and in spirit, overall the coverage of indigenous sports has been more comprehensive in Canada than in the United States. Indigenous and Canadian scholars have studied the surrounding impacts of sport in these communities more critically, with an eye to their often-marginalized population. In 2006, Janice Forsyth and Kevin Wamsley reported that in the past sport was used as tool to assimilate indigenous communities, but now its purpose has been inverted so that sport is used to mobilize and empower them.²⁸ They concluded that “events such as the North American Indigenous Games demonstrate how forms of culture, sport in particular, have been empowering for marginalized groups, for some to recapture their spirits.”²⁹

In 2015, cultural sports psychologists Blodgett and Schinke conducted research to uncover what cultural tensions Aboriginal hockey players who were transitioning from their Native reserves to “mainstream” culture might experience. The authors developed a participatory action research process in which they engaged three Aboriginal community members in the study, who recruited thirteen young Aboriginal hockey players who had moved away to pursue their athletic and academic careers. Findings that evidenced the shared cultural tensions faced by these student athletes were their loss of the sense of belonging to their Aboriginal communities, their desires to break down negative stereotypes that Aboriginal people are not able to “make it,” and their urges to give back to their home communities.³⁰ Communities that are disadvantaged due to power relations are often viewed through a deficit perspective, therefore setting them back from the beginning. Victoria Paraschak has stressed the importance of evaluating Aboriginal physical activity from a strengths perspective that incorporates practices of hope, rather than the oft-used deficit model. By focusing on strengths first, Aboriginal and other marginalized communities can be empowered.³¹

SPORT AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Sport allows us to preserve culture not only by means of playing these games, but also through cultural transmission. Broadly, the relationship between sport and culture involves “the values, ceremonies and way of life characteristics of a given group and the place of sport within that way of life.”³² In examining sport and culture, then, one

might consider the meanings, symbols, rituals, and power relations at play within any cultural setting.³³ Examples of sport as a tool for cultural preservation can be found worldwide, ranging from country-specific sports such as Irish hurling to the global game of soccer. Sumo wrestling has carried over traditions from the Japanese imperial family,³⁴ while the indigenous Maori of New Zealand have rituals and cultural celebrations in sports of rugby, netball, darts, and golf.³⁵ Not only are traditions linked to sports, but also a sport itself can be a form of tradition. Even though other sports in the United States have surpassed baseball in popularity, it is still woven into the fabric of American tradition.³⁶ Culture and tradition is not limited to players and teams; fans have also developed mainstay rituals, such as tailgating in football.³⁷ Throughout the history of the evolution of sports, sport and culture intersect irrespective of the size or location of the game play.

IDENTITY

Put simply, identity is knowing who we are, knowing who others are, and the intersection between these varying perceptions. Identity is not just about the self; who we think we are is closely related to who we think others are.³⁸ Moreover, identity is not merely a one-time declaration, but rather an ongoing process. Nor is one constrained to one identity at a time.³⁹ Jenkins asserted identification matters because it “is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively.”⁴⁰ When we think of how we relate to others and place ourselves in certain in-groups, we form a positive social identity.⁴¹ When we claim membership in a certain social in-group, we are saying that we are in favor of that group over the out-group and understand the stereotypes that adhere to that group.⁴² The idea of identity and social identity often play into the components of a structured social system.⁴³ Part of that social system includes sports and participation in sports is connected to identity and self-concept.⁴⁴ As members of a sporting group, or taking a certain sports role or performance, we can reinforce our identities.⁴⁵

In 1998, Velie argued that the term *race* had been largely abandoned as a scientific category.⁴⁶ Too often it was used to mean nationality. He concluded that “‘race’ has largely been replaced by ‘ethnic group,’ which puts emphasis more on culture than biology.”⁴⁷ By 2017, Garcia claimed that “race has been treated as both a ‘characteristic’ and a set of experiences that affect a multitude of life conditions and outcomes.” In his effort to determine what should be included in studying race in the social sciences, Garcia found that recent studies were more sensitive to multiple race categories than those conducted in earlier time periods.⁴⁸ James described how scholars who study race specifically treat it as a more dynamic and fluid concept that helps explain social processes, while others who simply use the concept of race treat it as a more fixed characteristic used to differentiate between “populations” in their studies.⁴⁹ George Henderson argued there are no pure races, which makes defining people by race arbitrary.⁵⁰ According to these designations, we study an indigenous group, not a race.

The concept of identity, like culture, is overarching and thorough, but also ambiguous from person to person. The significance of one’s identity is determined by the

degree to which one embraces it. Ethnic identity is made up of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that include knowledge about and attitudes toward one's ethnic culture, feelings of commitment and belongingness to one's ethnic group, and participation in traditional cultural activities.⁵¹ One can additionally think of ethnic identity as the perception of the strength of a person's connection to an ethnic group.⁵² Analyzing ethnic identity is complicated because the uniqueness that differentiates each group makes it difficult to draw conclusions across groups.⁵³ When speaking of Native Americans, the diversity within the more than 550 federally recognized tribes makes measuring ethnic identity difficult without knowing the more specific group with which one identifies.⁵⁴

As a form of ethnic identity, indigenous identity specifically involves a link to a community's specific traditions, a traditional homeland, and a shared sacred history.⁵⁵ How Native people define themselves leads to a number of political, biological, legal, and cultural questions regarding identity that many scholars struggle to answer.⁵⁶ While in wide social groups coauthor and primary investigator Welch often hears Native Americans refer to themselves as "Native Americans," in the company of Natives they reference their tribe. Weaver states the sense of membership in a community is "so integrally linked to a sense of identity that Native people often identify themselves by their reservations or tribal communities."⁵⁷ She goes on to assert that because of the strong emphasis on the collective culture within the indigenous population, it is problematic to have an individual who self-identifies as indigenous but has no specific community sanction.⁵⁸ Community is just one important part of the complexities with an American Indian identity. It is important to note the role of the federal government in molding the environmental context within which Native American communities and individual Indian ethnicity are formed.⁵⁹ Moreover, Native identities based on imposed legalities such as blood quantum have unfortunately been used as a political means to silence other Native Americans, dating from Europeans' first contact with Native peoples.⁶⁰

Confirming an authentic American Indian identity has been a highly contested issue within, without, and across Native American communities.⁶¹ Tribal liaison and associate director Warren Queton said identity is difficult for Native Americans because "we don't see ourselves as a race or ethnicity but as a sovereign nation and a political status that is different from any race or ethnicity in this nation."⁶² Circe Sturm explored the concepts of race, blood quantum, and identity in the Cherokee Nation and identifies complexities among Cherokee beliefs as to what constitutes membership as one of the Cherokee people.⁶³ Even though blood degree is the sanctioned determinant, she found competing beliefs about Cherokee-ness with regard to culture and community.⁶⁴

Obviously, to discuss blood, race, legitimacy, and identity with regard to Native communities is significantly complex. In this article, coauthor Welch approaches Cherokee identity from her personal understanding, upbringing, and beliefs. This identity includes both legal enrollment in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians as well as some degree of connection to cultural tradition. It is important that participants in this study are stickball players who identify as Cherokee because we aim to

explore the phenomenon of what it means to be a Cherokee stickball player. Important to this identity is being a resident of the reservation in North Carolina and participating in community activities such as stickball. All participants in this study identify as Cherokee and are enrolled members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. The purpose of this study is to uncover the Cherokee stickball players' reasons for playing and the larger meaning that the game carries as part of their Cherokee identity and the Cherokee culture. This specific investigation into an unrepresented group provides a case study on the power of sport to preserve culture and its possible impact and meaning beyond the playing field.

METHOD, PROCEDURE, AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

A qualitative, interpretivist research method was used in order to understand the role stickball plays in cultural preservation by interviewing Cherokee stickball participants. This research design was chosen to elicit a thick description from the Cherokee stickball players.⁶⁵ In qualitative research, the researcher is best fitted to act as the data collection instrument because of the ability to be sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data.⁶⁶ This was especially relevant in this case, where we aimed to reverse a research tradition that normally conducts a study *on* indigenous people rather than *with* them.⁶⁷ To best capture the stories of the participants, interviews were chosen as the method of data collection.⁶⁸ In addition to interviews, coauthor Welch observed Cherokee stickball games held on the reservation. These observations assisted in understanding the sport of stickball in terms of both context and place.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was conditionally obtained through the researchers' university pending review from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' IRB. The tribe's IRB was first approved by their IRB committee and then by the tribal council. Upon notification of the approval from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the university IRB approved the research.

Criterion-based, purposeful sampling was used in order to identify potential research participants.⁶⁹ The inclusion criteria required that the participants be tribal members of the Eastern Band of the Cherokees and be a current or former stickball player. Participants were recruited for participation by email and verbal communication, both in person and by telephone. Fifteen participants were recruited and when eleven participants agreed to take part in the study, the researchers deemed that no further recruitment was necessary. As Mason explains, "New data (especially if theoretically sampled) will always add something new, but there are diminishing returns, and the cut off between adding to emerging findings and not adding, might be considered inevitably arbitrary."⁷⁰ With eleven participants we believe that we reached the "saturation" point when no new information was being added, also known as "informational redundancy."⁷¹

All participants were male and ranged in age between nineteen and ninety-two. All the participants were residents of the Qualla Boundary, the Cherokee Reservation in western North Carolina. Further information on the participants can be found in table 1.

TABLE 1
CHEROKEE MEN STICKBALL PLAYERS

| Name | Age | Profession/Field | Years Played | Stickball Team | Original Community |
|---------|-----|-------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Adam | 20 | Student | 12 | Hummingbirds | Wolfetown |
| Brad | 38 | Student/Community Svces | 7 | Big Cove | Big Cove |
| Charlie | 40 | Tribal Education | 32 | Hummingbirds | Wolfetown |
| David | 30 | Tribal Transportation | 7 | Hummingbirds | Birdtown |
| Ethan | 35 | Tribal Utilities | 15 | Wolfetown | Wolfetown |
| Frank | 36 | Carpenter | 6 | Big Cove | Big Y |
| George | 31 | Cultural Preservation | 11 | Big Cove | Painttown |
| Harold | 92 | Cultural Preservation | 10 | Big Cove | Big Cove |
| Ian | 60 | Retired/Entrepreneur | 40 | Wolfetown | Wolfetown |
| John | 39 | Carpenter | 30 | Wolfetown | Wolfetown |
| Keith | 22 | Student | 14 | Wolfetown | Wolfetown |

Interviews were chosen as the instrument of data collection, as the inner thoughts and experiences of the participants could be elicited.⁷² Interviews were also an appropriate choice for data collection because it gave the participants the opportunity to tell their personal and cultural stories. Cherokee culture has a rich oral tradition, of which storytelling is central. This tradition is hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years old and is vitally important to those within and outside the community.⁷³ Two types of stories emerge from this tradition: stories about family and friends from recent history that range from humorous to serious, and tribal stories told by community members from a long-established ritual.⁷⁴ The participants in this study shared both types of stories, including both exploits on the stickball field by friends and family members and the tribal story of the stickball game between birds and animals. The stories captured through the qualitative research process are evidence of the efficacy of interviews when implemented within a storytelling culture such as the Cherokee.⁷⁵

A semi-structured interview guide was used which prescribed open-ended questions with probes and follow-up questions.⁷⁶ Semi-structured interviews allowed for the researchers to diverge from specific questions in order to pursue certain topics in greater depth. Coauthor Welch conducted all the interviews. As a member of the Cherokee community she had a familiarity with most participants that we believe allowed players to be more candid than they would have been if speaking with outside researchers. Interviews with tribal elders tended to be more conversational, as asking questions repeatedly may be interpreted as disrespectful in Native American culture.⁷⁷ The researchers wanted the participants to be heard, so it was important that the

interviews thoroughly capture the voices of the participants within this historically marginalized population. By incorporating direct quotations, interviews provide evidence for interpretation as well as ensuring that participants' voices can be heard.⁷⁸

Interviews were conducted over a three-week period on the Cherokee Reservation in western North Carolina. The average length of the interviews was forty minutes. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. The transcriptions were sent to the participants for member-checking.⁷⁹ Constant comparative analysis was used to code the data. The transcripts were read individually by the researchers and individual codes were assigned to the data. The codes of individual instances were continuously compared to the rest of the data.⁸⁰ The researchers then coded the data together to identify emergent themes.

Welch, the primary researcher for this study, identifies as Native American, specifically as a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee. She grew up on the Cherokee Reservation in western North Carolina and had moderate knowledge of the sport of stickball prior to beginning this research. The researcher's membership in the tribe granted her easier access to the community. Her membership in the tribe allowed her to build rapport and trust with the participants and allowed for an insider perspective culturally. This insider perspective may allow for a "deeper contextual insight into the community."⁸¹ Additionally, the position of being an insider in Native American communities improves the strength of the research process.⁸² Swisher has written extensively about the need for minority researchers to be conducting and writing about the groups to which they belong.⁸³ As a woman who does not play stickball, however, Welch's perspective is not that of a true insider, although she is a member of the community.

FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) cultural preservation; (2) sense of community; and (3) ethnic identity affirmation. The ways in which stickball continues rituals and traditions that constitute the Cherokee culture act to preserve that culture. The tight-knit relationships that form within the stickball team and greater Cherokee community foster their sense of community. Ethnic identity affirmation is exhibited in how these men described stickball as upholding their specific role as Cherokee men. These themes were overwhelmingly present throughout the interviews with participations and the passion with which these topics were spoken about also validated their selection.

Cultural Preservation

All of the participants mentioned that culture was important in motivating them to be involved with stickball, with several saying that to preserve culture was the most important reason. As George, a cultural preservation educator on the Cherokee reservation, summarized it, the game balances several cultural aspects: song, dance, language, and spirituality. For him, "those four things make up what we are as Cherokees. It keeps

us connected to who we are.” Being connected to “who we are” was much more than a personal identity for George; it was more about the cultural belonging of being Cherokee. Keith, whose male family members had all played stickball, told the story of how traditional stickball enabled him to connect to his uncle, who only spoke in the traditional Cherokee language: “he told me in Cherokee he’s proud of me. He had like almost tears in his eyes because you know he loved the game so much when he was playing.” Seemingly, stickball gave these men an extra window into their culture that other activities did not.

After losing so much culture as a tribe, the urge to preserve what they still could arose several times in these interviews. David expressed how he didn’t realize the importance of his culture until he got older, but now, he said, “I want to play so we’re not losing any more of our culture . . . and motivation that they failed in colonizing us, that feels pretty good.” In Welch’s experience, this seems to be a common feeling among younger adults in Cherokee. A lack of appreciation at a young age turns into an eager grasp for the traditional culture once one realizes how important and unique being Cherokee is. One of Wolfetown’s newest leaders on the stickball team, Evan, understood the responsibility he was undertaking and his desire to “make it a legacy, I mean the more you keep doing it. The history ain’t ever going to get lost.” Keith, one of the younger participants, also spoke about the importance of culture. “I love stickball because . . . it’s my culture, I never want it to die. I want to teach it to my son, the youth. It’s real important to our traditions and our culture.” Over and over again, these players were quick to point out the traditions and culture of the game—before they mentioned the rewards of winning or the physicality of the game, if they even brought them up at all.

Native American culture emphasizes keeping traditions alive and passing them down to the future generations. Several of the participants ($n = 8$) mentioned their interest in keeping the game alive for the sake of the future generations. George, a father of two, said, “I want to play so it’s there for my kids and grandkids.” Frank, who expressed his passion for researching the game, also felt strongly about getting the youth involved. He said, “I take it real strong to heart trying to teach these little ones and that’s . . . what keeps me going. Watch our little warriors keep moving up. And our youngest player on Big Cove team is 2 years old and our oldest is 79.” There is a sense that educating the youth comes from a strong desire to implement something these men either did not have or did not appreciate when they were growing up. This continuous cycle is emphasized throughout Native American culture.

Adam, at twenty the youngest game participant, expressed how their playing encouraged others to preserve the Cherokee culture, “going out there and showing the community that your average person, or your average guy or kid or whatever, can go out and be a part of culture so that means it encourages everyone else to keep the culture alive.” That stickball was not only a way for the players to preserve culture, but for the larger community as well, exemplifies the importance of the game. There is a sense of pride associated with preserving a culture that has been so threatened. As George stated, “I think it all goes back to pride though. It makes me proud that we’re carrying the game on. That it didn’t die even though they tried to take it from our ancestors.”

Sense of Community (sga-du-gi)

Seven smaller communities lie within the Cherokee Reservation, Wolfetown, Painttown, Yellowhill, Birdtown, Big Cove, Big Y, and Snowbird, and their respective members take pride in them. Large families usually reside together in one community and it's not uncommon for these families to be known around the larger region. Members participate in sports and recreation within communities and also represent them in the intertribal sports leagues. Even long past their playing days, community members enthusiastically proclaim their own communities. One of the older participants brought up that historically, the outcome of stickball matches between communities could determine territorial boundaries, or even win a father's permission for a woman to marry outside of her home community.

As interest in traditional stickball waned during the past two decades, Wolfetown was the only community able to keep its team largely intact, often playing games against each other instead of other communities' teams. In the last few years, however, the Big Cove community has reestablished their team and a team that is not specific to one community has also been formed. The Hummingbirds unites players from different communities who may have moved away or don't have a strong tie to a single community. One of the Hummingbirds players referred to the team as the "mutt team." At the 104th annual Cherokee Indian fair in 2016 a full slate of games was played between Wolfetown, Big Cove, and the Hummingbirds.

Eight of the eleven participants in this study discussed how proud they are to represent their community on the team. In addition, these players are catalysts in bringing their communities together. They do not only play and practice, but also gather to eat, dance, and "just visit." These social gatherings allow community members to interact in ways that have become less common as schedules have become full and technology has developed. As Adam explained, "Traditionally we're very communal. We stay in tight communities. It feels like whenever we all play stickball, even if we're trying to kill each other, we all bring the community together and that's a good thing for Cherokee." Stickball not only brings these smaller communities within Cherokee physically together to watch matches, but also creates a special atmosphere for residents to bond over a shared cultural tradition. Adam reiterated, "the main point of stickball is to bring the people of Cherokee together. Keep them from destroying each other." As Adam stated, traditional stickball was less about war and more about avoiding conflict and bringing people together. Today it is a way for the different communities to bond over their individual pride and as the greater Cherokee community as well.

Ethnic Identity Affirmation

While the players emphasized the pride in representing their communities, they also felt a strong personal connection to stickball as a multivalent practice. All the participants spoke of stickball as a part of their bigger identity as Cherokee people. George said, "Stickball's who I am, who we are. And like I said it involves all four of those things and that's part of my life as it is as a Cherokee person. You have to have that

spirituality. You have to have that song and dance and language. And culture. That's all in there." Similarly, all participants stated that they felt an internal pull towards the game and that stickball was a part of who they were. It was apparent that this is not a hobby they took up for any external reasons, but rather that being Cherokee and playing stickball, combined with other cultural aspects that accompany the game, is crucial to who these men are as individuals.

The importance of practicing cultural activities with a Cherokee identity is a consistent theme throughout the participants' responses. Frank said, "I think part of what I believe it takes to be Cherokee is having culture and stickball is a part of that. Language is part of that and stickball brings in everything. Brings in language rituals, stories, and that's a big part of being Cherokee to me. That's part of my identity as Cherokee is playing stickball now." Frank makes the crucial point that, because it encompasses other cultural traditions such as language, stickball is more powerful than any single traditional practice might be.

It's important to note that the game participants did not explicitly state that they felt pressured to play. If they believed that they were expected to play, they seemed to view that expectation as more of an honor than a burden. Keith elaborated, "It was important to my ancestors because it was like a way of life and it proved you were a man. If you're a good ballplayer it proved that you were tough and that you could uphold your position as a Cherokee stickball-playing man." Stickball as "a way of life" for a Cherokee man was echoed throughout these interviews, distinguishing it from any other personal connection with an activity. It seems to establish the player's identity not simply as Cherokee, but as a Cherokee man. Like Keith, Adam described stickball as the "passage to manhood," while David called it a part of the "culture of being a man."

Compared to other sports or activities, stickball is much more personal to these players. When asked what makes stickball different from other sports, David said, "Ownership. I own this game. It's part of who I am. It's ours. It's us as Cherokee people, we own the game, it's ours, it's nobody else's." Other sports have been implemented in school with outsiders' rules, but stickball is set apart because it belongs to these players in a multitude of ways. This specific style of stickball was created by the Cherokee for the Cherokee. Furthermore, as Bill put it, in Cherokee, if you play stickball, "you're known as a stickball player." Often that role as a stickball player can outweigh others. As David said vehemently, "I'm not David the former felon when I go on the ball field. I'm David the stickball player." It was evident that stickball solidifies these players' identities as Cherokee men.

DISCUSSION

Whereas Zogry was more concerned with the technical classification of stickball, its role in religion, and other research questions similarly inflected by Western scholarly traditions, this study is focused on the contemporary state of stickball and what it means to current players. When others come to visit Cherokee, they may view Cherokee men participating in a game akin to lacrosse, but for the participants it is much more than

sport. Rather than the actual mechanics of the game, our emphasis is on the individual players, their motivations in playing, and the impact on the greater community. As their words have shown, contemporary players view stickball as preserving and passing Cherokee culture from one generation to the next. Often, however, it is mistakenly framed as a historical relic in Cherokee, rather than a living and thriving tool that keeps tradition alive while building community on multiple levels.

It matters, then, that this article presents stickball as it lives in the community. Much of scholarly research aims to resolve ambiguities in the culture of the game, such as accompanying rituals, yet the beauty of stickball in Cherokee lies in its ambiguity. It is precisely its mystery and magic that make it such a resilient, evolving piece of Cherokee culture. As Vennum explains, “to penetrate the Indian game one must enter a world of spiritual belief and magic, where players sewed inchworms into the innards of lacrosse balls and medicine men gazed at miniature lacrosse sticks to predict future events, where bits of batwings were twisted into a stick’s netting, and where famous players were (and still are) buried with their sticks.”⁸⁴

Normally, definitions of stickball reduce it to the historical precursor of the game of lacrosse so that it is categorized too easily as a standard game. It has all the surface elements of a game, with the end goal of scoring more points than the opposing team, but the fire and spirit at its heart make it much more. All of the participants spoke of the pride in playing for their community. If in a sense all athletes are representatives for their communities, for the Cherokee to be an agent of your community goes beyond a typical athlete/community relationship. There is a mutual respect between the stickball players and the members of the community, especially including the elders, who are seen as the purveyors of the blessings of the game. Native athletes have been commonly perceived in the context of colonization, such as when they were sent to boarding schools to become civilized. In that era, Native athletes were taking on the white man’s sports and found great pride and value in beating the white man at his own games. While athletic accomplishments in general may also serve as a way of proclaiming Native identity, stickball in particular is much more saliently linked to cultural preservation. The importance of stickball’s role in preserving culture was the prevailing theme from the respondents in this study. Culture, community, and identity are all closely tied together and participants often intermingled discussion of these themes seamlessly.

As George mentioned, stickball encompasses four of the most important pieces of Cherokee culture: song, dance, language and spirituality, so perhaps no other tradition or ritual in Cherokee culture is able to achieve the intertwined themes of cultural preservation, community, and ethnic identity affirmation so effectively. Stickball brings teams, communities, and the Cherokee people together in a way that other activities struggle to do because sport can encompass many aspects of culture that normally stand alone. Language, art, and community are all intertwined in this game. Players are called by their “Indian” names and speak the native language in maneuvering during the game. Artists draw inspiration from the game in everything from portraits to the actual construction of stickball sticks. Similar to how the sticks carry the ball, the game is a vehicle, a tool, for these aspects of the Cherokee culture to manifest itself.

However, like the sticks, the game symbolizes much more than a simple instrument. More than anything, stickball is a living, breathing thing, played for generations before and most likely generations to come.

Grant Jarvie's book *Sport, Racism, and Ethnicity* describes sport as "an arena through which various groups actively re-work their relationships and respond to changing social conditions as a whole."⁸⁵ People are purposively choosing to participate in the social activity that is sport.⁸⁶ One might argue that stickball's aspect as a deeply social sport may give it a transformative power greater than that of other activities, especially those performed alone. As human rights activist Dr. Richard Lapchick would say, "there's something about sport."⁸⁷ According to Lapchick, that "something" about sport has the power to bring people together in times of tragedy and to set aside preconceived notions and stereotypes.⁸⁸ As others use sport to overcome and unite, the Cherokee also use sport as a statement. While the Cherokee people may have been severely demolished, these players use the game to show their perseverance, that they are still here and not an extinct people. The power of sport and its role in our lives is exemplified by a dynamic sport like stickball. Just like many sports, it instills teamwork and motivation in competition, but it almost exists on a separate plane because of the strong connection to personal identity. It is not uncommon for athletes to identify with their sport, but when the sport integrates history, family, language, ritual, prayer, dance, and others, it is an identity that is not lost with an injury or retirement. To "retire" from stickball would be like saying you have retired from the very essence of your being.

While anyone can learn to speak the Cherokee language or how to make a traditional basket, it is difficult to replicate the regenerative impact of stickball on the Cherokee community. Without stickball, there would be no use for the rituals and traditions that accompany the game. The activities that surround the game prepare the players to win, or help them to overcome defeat and other outcomes of participating. Medicine men conjure and perform their formulas before stickball games to help their team win. After the game players "go to water" to remove bitter feelings. These and other significant Cherokee traditions could be lost if Cherokee people stopped playing stickball, and it appears from our study that this risk has led to stickball's resurgence. This urge to preserve culture can be seen in other aspects of Cherokee as well. The tribe has introduced a Cherokee language immersion program for children to save the dying language, for example.

Sport is a vehicle for these powerful themes of cultural preservation, community, and ethnic identity affirmation, but it nonetheless remains a competition where the score is kept and the players want to win. Several times participants addressed the importance of winning. Harold, at ninety-two the oldest community member and a highly respected elder in the community, no longer plays but often serves as an announcer. Harold simply said, "the main thing is to win the game." When Ian, another one of the older participants, was asked to name the most important part of stickball, he said, "Winning. Winning. Controlling the ball and keeping the title. Getting the trophy back or whatever, or keeping the trophy. Or the piece of pottery maybe." The younger players also expressed the importance of winning and the physicality of the

game. Keith, one of the younger players, reiterated, “you just really want to win,” while Adam said, “you feel the same emotion that you’d feel with any sport.”

Yet clearly stickball is not something the Cherokee people “do,” or that their ancestors did, but rather an ingrained cultural formation that brings together rival communities and concurrently provides the opportunity for men to practice and embody their identity. Many aspects of stickball demonstrate the complexity of that indigenous, Native American identity. Just as the score is not the only important part of the game, Cherokee identity cannot be reduced to a simple percentage of blood; these individuals reinforced their identity as Cherokee men by playing and participating in rituals and the community. Their role as a stickball player cannot be compacted into the sport-only identity often implied in discussions of athletes’ identity. As Zogry noted, “People play anetso to express their identity: as Cherokee, as members of a particular class, as community protectors, and as caretakers of tradition.”⁸⁹ It appears that playing stickball makes these participants feel more Cherokee. As this article has shown, many of the participants bring up playing the game as a rite of passage in which a player becomes not simply a “man,” but a Cherokee man. Stickball helps these men feel more Cherokee internally and it also affects how they are perceived by others in the community. There is a strong sense of masculinity without being overtly macho.

More broadly, a sense of confidence comes with playing the game that is linked to being a strong Cherokee citizen. Community members uphold a sense of respect for their stickball teams, with distinct roles for both men and women. Women are allowed to participate in certain rituals beforehand and on the eve of a game perform nightlong rituals for their players, but are strictly restricted from touching their men and their sticks. They obey stipulations, such as refraining from preparing food and relations with females. Historically, there have been rumblings that women too played stickball, until the games became too violent. That women may have played traditional stickball aligns with the fact that Cherokee social organization is matrilineal and raises many questions about gender roles that could be explored in future work.

As one participant said, “we always want to make our community proud of us.” Members of the community are not only proud: they hold Cherokee men to the expectation that they will play. Men may be looked down upon for not playing in a way that does not occur when sitting out other community activities or sports. In turn, the teams and players inspire each other to be more active in preserving the Cherokee culture. Players speak of how older men have decided to pick up the game because their sons started playing. Stickball teams hold social gatherings, such as cookouts, that create more opportunities to unify the community. This sense of extended family within the communities makes the reservation unique, tightly knit in a way rarely found in other neighborhoods. As a result of this study, we believe many players, and family and community members consider stickball to be much, much more than the game seen by tourists or other visitors, who most often do not see the all-night dancing and praying that takes place before the match, as well as afterwards when the teams “go to water” to rinse themselves free of all that has just happened.

While other indigenous populations also have games that preserve their cultures, it is difficult to compare those games to stickball because we lack clear understanding of

what other indigenous sports might fully encompass for the players and the community. We would argue, however, that when one's identity as a stickball player is comprised of elements as complex and deeply rooted as it is formed in Cherokee, the game reaches another level of significance that other sports, and likely even other indigenous sports, do not. Stickball also stands out because the game maintains a purity of tradition. The only modern element that has been introduced is the announcer, who uses an electronic speaker to call the games for the crowd, often mixing in words in the Cherokee language. While the mighty Iroquois may have birthed the first lacrosse game, they are now playing the modern, more industrialized lacrosse. The Mississippi Choctaw still play their stickball game with a yearly world series. For viewing purposes, they spray-paint the ball bright orange, use proper officials and scoreboards, and even keep the game within the time limits of quarters.⁹⁰ Many Cherokee elders criticize our game for not being as traditional as it once was, but when comparing traditional stickball to other Native games across the continent it is hard to find another game with the same level of natural preservation.

CONCLUSION

Throughout our past, outsiders have visited the Cherokee Indian reservation to observe the phenomenon that is Cherokee stickball. Previous ethnographic studies of stickball portray it as more of a relic of the past, stuck in time and eventually fading away.⁹¹ Some have gone as far to predict that the death of the rituals will leave only the athletic aspects of the game for the future.⁹² Most recently, however, Zogry has studied stickball more thoroughly and notes its persistence in Cherokee as a powerful tool for cultural preservation.⁹³ Now, after we have spoken with these players, we maintain that stickball and its associated traditions are in a period of resurgence. Many of the participants spoke of how communities have recently reestablished bigger, stronger teams in the past decade. Some traditional aspects of the game that began to fade have also been reintroduced. For example, the ball dance, an elaborate pregame ritual that was nearly nonexistent in some communities, has now been reintroduced. This reemergence signals that the rituals are gaining value in the development and nurturing of Cherokee identity. At a time when the tribe is fighting to preserve every bit of culture, this seemingly small ritual exemplifies the role of stickball in keeping the tribe together.

This study also illustrates how important it is to not take stickball, or any other cultural ritual, at face value when traditions that predate documentation may often lie under the surface. It is crucial to consider the perspectives of those recording history. These findings add to the much-needed research about Native American communities by Native Americans. Additionally, we have noted women's involvement with the rituals surrounding stickball, but investigating women's own participation in the game and comparing how women and men perceive the significance of stickball is a clear next step.

Moreover, stickball exemplifies a cultural tradition that should not be strictly defined. As Gjerde urged, "We should spend less time thinking about culture as

traditions transmitted and preserved from generation to generation and more about traditions as fluid representations shaped, in part, by hegemonic forces.”⁹⁴ It is not as simple as passing down a physical heirloom fully intact. Often, especially in sport, we want to have some basis for comparison, an easy way to place the game in our mind. While there are several other ball games played by indigenous peoples, we must be hesitant before making quick comparisons. Stickball is often simply categorized as traditional lacrosse without much thought about the cultural roots. For stickball players, there is no other game that can compare because, as David explicitly stated, there is no other game in which they can claim ownership.

People care about sport in a way that distinguishes it from almost any activity. Sport is so powerful, pervasive, and relatable, that it allows rituals and traditions to be more effective than they would be in any other form. Sport is often referred to as the “glue” that holds communities together and that is certainly true for stickball on the reservation. *Sga-du-gi*, or “community,” is derived from the word *ga-du-gi*, “to work together.” Community, then, derives from an action, as are many other words in the Cherokee language; it makes perfect sense that community is born out of the collaboration of our people.

Stickball was once known as the little brother of war, where stakes could be as high as tribal property rights, but now “winning” might mean even more. As David theorized, “I think what the game used to be about was to prepare our Cherokee men for war. And I think it still is; we’re just fighting different wars now. We’re fighting drug addiction. We’re fighting to get our kids into school. We’re fighting to keep our kids with a clean criminal history. We’re fighting to preserve our culture. Still. So, I mean we’re fighting different wars now.”

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