

Pahsahëman - The Lenape Indian Football Game

As Told By

Nora Thompson Dean and Lucy Parks Blalock

updated in 2017 by Jim Rementer

It is a beautiful morning in late Spring. The year is 1600. In a large open field near one of their main villages (in an area the white people would later name Philadelphia) the Lenape people are playing a game. Laughter can be heard from the participants and spectators alike. The people relish these carefree moments playing their game which they call Pahsahëman. Little did they know as they played the game that over four hundred years later their descendants would be playing the same game, but their location had changed because they had been moved to a far-off land called Oklahoma.

Introduction

The games played by the Lenape or Delaware Indians have not been well documented. When they have been mentioned in the literature, many details of the games are sadly lacking.

The Lenape Indians have long played a version of football which differs markedly from the football game known to non-Indians. In the Lenape football game, men are pitted against the women in a very rough-and-tumble game.

This article is based on the rules of the game which were written out by the late Nora Thompson Dean (Touching Leaves Woman) for the Lenape Land Association in Pennsylvania. ¹ The organization no longer exists and this information which was in their newsletter in April, 1971, is reprinted here with additional information and photographs.

History of the Game

Various forms of football were played along the northeast coast of America. Flannery (1939:187) regards football as one of "forty-three traits [which] may be due to independent invention in the coastal Algonquian region, since they are not characteristic of the Iroquoian, Southeastern, or Northern Algonquian areas." Football games were also recorded for the Micmac, Abnaki, Malecite, Massachusetts, and Narragansett (Flannery *ibid.*). Swanton (1928:707) also says it is "apparently a coastal Algonquian game, not found in the Southeast except among the Creeks."

Some forms of football were played men-against-men as among the Massachusetts in 1634, reported by William Wood (Culin 1901:698). In a number of cases the text does not indicate whether the teams were composed of men only, or

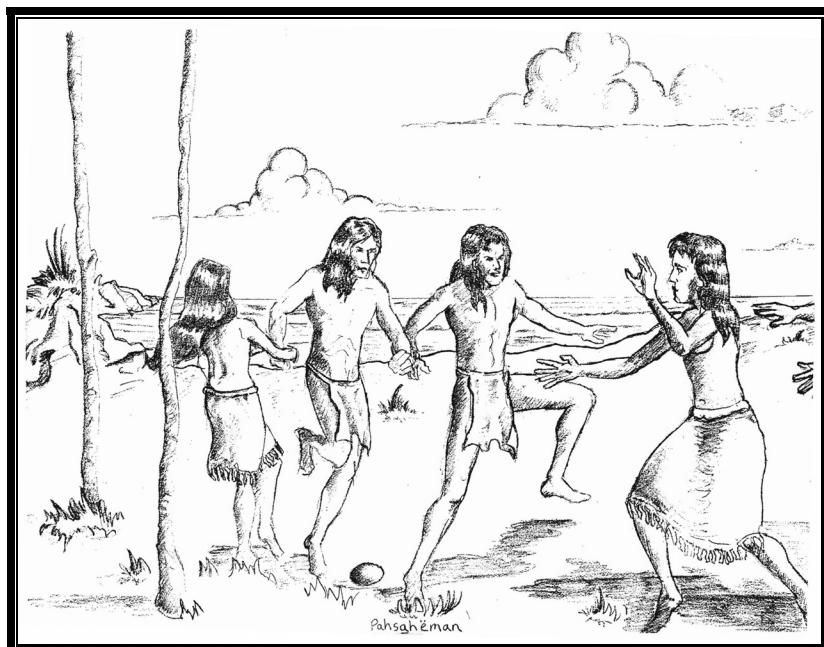
men-versus-women. A good example is the following brief account by Roger Williams who wrote about "pasuckquakohowauog," which he translates as "they meet to foot-ball." He says:

"They have great meetings of foot-balle playing, only in summer, town against town, upon some broad sandy shore, free from stone, or upon some soft heathie plot, because of their naked feet, at which they have great stakings, but seldom quarrel." (Williams 1643: 146)

Some writers (Speck 1931:76) and (Goddard 1978:231) claim the Lenape learned this game from the Shawnee. In fact, we have no very early descriptive accounts of the game among the Lenape. Neither do we have any early accounts for the game among the Shawnee, so far as this writer knows.

We know from historical accounts that at least some of the Shawnee arrived in the homeland of the Lenape about the year 1692, and settled near the Delaware River in eastern Pennsylvania (Howard 1981:7).

Thirty-six years earlier, in 1656, Daniel Denton wrote, "Their Recreations are chiefly Foot-ball and Cards, at which they will play away all they have, excepting a Flap to cover their nakedness." (Denton 1670:7). Unfortunately Denton uses the term "Indians" to describe any and all tribes he met in the area, so we cannot be certain whether the game was used by groups of the Munsee Delawares, or Montauk farther east on Long Island, or both. However, this does tell us that a form of a football game was being played by Delawares or closely related tribes living just north and east of the main body of Lenape at least as early as 1656.



Pahsahëman – The Lenape Football Game
[drawing by tribal member Clayton Chambers]

At the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, we find an account of the football game by Henry Spelman. He was captured and raised by the Indians for two years (1609-1610) and later served as interpreter for the colony. In his account of the game, he says:

They [the Virginia Indians] use beside football play, which wemen and young boyes doe much play at. The men never. They make ther Gooles as ours only they never fight nor pull one another doun (Arber 1910: CXIV). [His comment, "The men never," frequently applies to the game today as most of the male players are older boys and young men.]

Another account written about 1610 from the same area reads:

Likewise they have the exercise of football, in which they only forcibly encounter with the foot to carry the ball the one from the other, and spurned it to the goal with a kind of dexterity and swift footmanship, which is the honour of it; but they never strike up one another's heels, as we do, not accompting that praiseworthy to purchase a goal by such as advantage (Strachey:77).

After the Denton account, the next account of a Delaware football game was in the 1790s.

During the season of lethargy the Indian hunter spends his time dosing in the sunshine, upon the grass, or upon the couch of skins and leaves in his wigwam. They had occasional dances, such as we have described, with the matrons and girls. Foot-ball was a favorite pastime with them. They also had a gambling game somewhat resembling dice, of which they were immoderately fond.

Mr. Burnet, in his Notes, gives the following account of a game of foot-ball which the renowned chief Bu-kon-ge-he-las got up on the River Auglaise to entertain a party of white men who visited him.

This Indian village was beautifully situated in the center of a large green and level plain. The game was arranged for the afternoon. The chief selected two young men to get a purse of trinkets made up, to be the reward of the successful party. That matter was soon accomplished, and the whole village, male and female, in their best attire, were on the lawn - which was a plain of four or five acres, thickly covered with blue grass. At each of the opposite extremes of this lawn two stakes were set up about six feet apart.

The men played against the women; and, to countervail the superiority of their strength, it was a rule of the game that they were not to touch the ball with their hands on the penalty of forfeiting the

purse. The females had the privilege of using their hands as well as their feet. They were allowed to pick up the ball and run and throw it as far as their strength and activity would permit. When one of the women or girls succeeded in getting the ball, the men were allowed to seize her, whirl her around, and, if necessary, throw her on the grass for the purpose of disengaging the ball, taking care not to touch it except with their feet.

The contending parties arranged themselves in the center of the lawn; the men on one side, the women on the other. Each party faced the goal of its opponent. The side which succeeded in driving the ball through the stakes at the goal of its adversary, was proclaimed victor, and received the purse.

All matters being thus arranged, the venerable chief came upon the lawn, and saying something in the Indian language, not understood by his guests, threw up the ball and retired. The contest then began. The parties were pretty equally matched as to numbers, there being about one hundred on each side. For a long time the victory appeared to be doubtful. The young girls were the most active of their party, and most frequently caught the ball. It was very amusing to see the struggle between them and the young men. It generally terminated in the prostration of the girl upon the grass, before the ball could be forced from her hand.

The contest continued about an hour, with great animation and various prospects of success. It was finally decided in favor of the women. One athletic girl seized the ball, and triumphing over all the efforts to wrench it from her, rushed toward the goal and succeeded in throwing it through the stakes.

Great was the exultation of the victors. Their countenances beamed with joy. It seemed to add greatly to the appreciation of their triumph, that it was gained in the presence of their distinguished white guests.
(Abbott, Chapter 4)

What might have been a football game among the Lenape was written at Fairfield, Thames River, Ontario, on September 5, 1811. It reads:

"Some Indians of the Upper Monsey towns camped out near town where they disturbed our rest the entire night with drumming, dancing, and noise. One of them explained they had made this compliment because last spring Br. Schnall had given a warning to several of their young people that ball playing which always is connected with unpleasant noise is not to be done here near us in town." (Moravian Archives, folio 8, box 163)."

Indian football was also played by the Delawares of Western Oklahoma, a group which split off from the main group of Delawares in the late 1700's. The following account of the game was given by two of the elders, Willard Thomas and Bessie Snake:

"Ball game - they used a soft ball made of deer skin stuffed with hair, about the size of a soft ball. A team had men and women both on it. The rule was the women could throw it, but the men had to kick it. They had a line at the end of the field and the one who got the ball across that line scored a point. It took one score to win. It was really a rough game. They had betting on that game. The field was a little over 100 yards long. They started the game by a man throwing the ball up among a bunch of men and women out in the center. Men could catch the ball, but couldn't throw it; they had to pass it by kicking it. Men got their shirts torn up and everything else. A bunch of women would grab him and keep him from kicking the ball." (Hale 1984:34).

Nora Thompson Dean gave the following account in 1971. The additional comments in square brackets are by the author:

Pahsahëman - Lenape Indian Football Game

Lenape football is not something that the Delawares have adopted from the whites. The name of the game is Pahsahëman. The ball used in the game is called Pahsahikàn. Here are some details:

The Ball is made of deerskin, and is oblong in shape, and is stuffed with deer hair. It is about 9 inches in diameter.



Pahsahikan - The Lenape Football

The Goalposts are on the ends of the field. They are made of trees or posts about 5 or 6 inches in diameter which have had the branches removed. They are about 15 foot high. There is no crossbar as in the white man's football goalposts. The two on each end of the field are spaced about 6 feet apart.



**Three Delaware Women Showing the Football Goalposts
about 1920**

The Playing Field is of no special size. The one near Copan, Oklahoma is approximately 150 feet long, and, at its narrowest point, 60 feet. This is to say that the goalposts are 150 feet apart. The field is not really bounded by straight lines to mark the field.

The Teams are two in number. One team being all men, the other all women, thus, the men play against the women. Each team can have any number of players. Young people can also play, but smaller children are usually not allowed to play for fear that they might get hurt.



Some Younger Delawares Playing the Game in 1965

The Play began when some selected old man or old woman went to the middle of the field and threw the ball into the air (as in basketball). The men and women players would jump up to knock it toward their own goalpost. The men may not carry the ball, nor may they pass it. If a man catches or intercepts the ball, he must stand where he catches it and kick it toward the men's goal, or toward another man. A man should not tackle or grab a woman who has the ball, but must feign to prevent the woman from passing. He may also knock the ball from her hands. The women players may pass, run with, or even kick the ball. [Mrs. Dean later added that the women would kick at it if it was on the ground, but no high kicks.] They may grab or tackle the men players. [Here too Mrs. Dean added that this would never be a "flying tackle" like in White Man's football]. The women may throw the ball through the goalposts, or carry it through.



The Women Can Grab the Men Players

The Scoring is done by some selected old man or old woman. A pile of twelve sticks (about 2 inches long each) is used to keep score. The sticks are put into two rows (one for men and one for women), one stick each time a goal is made, until all twelve sticks are used up, then whichever group has the most sticks is the winner. For example, if the women have seven sticks and the men five, then the women are the winners; or, if the women have eleven sticks and the men one, the women are the winners. If the score is tied, 6 to 6, a play-off takes place until one more goal is made.

The Playing Season begins in the Spring when the weather is nice enough. This can be March or April. The season ends in mid-June, and the older people considered it wrong to play this ball game at other times of the year.

The Other Rules are few. It is customary, before the first game in the Spring, to have some selected old person make a prayer, much to thank the Creator for having let the people live to play again, and to ask that he might let them live to play in future seasons.

At the end of the last game in mid-June, some old lady takes the ball and makes a prayer, following which she opens the ball letting the deerhair fall to the ground. The hide is given to someone to be kept and made into another ball for the next Spring (if it is in good enough condition).

Although this is not a rule it may be of interest. If the women are losing a game, one of their favorite "tricks" is to give the ball to some tottery old lady who walks through the goalposts with the ball, often helped by some of the younger women. This is because they know that the men would not try to touch or knock the ball from that old lady's hands.



Walking a Woman Elder Through the Goalposts

No set number of games is played, just until the people are tired. Usually the games begin in the afternoon.

A bet-string is passed around the camps or among the people. This is a long string on which people who wish to bet tie something such as a head scarf, handkerchief, or even a ribbon. If the team on which the person bets wins, the person can go and get anything off this bet-string that has not been spoken for.

This concludes the account by Mrs. Dean. The Lenape Football Game continues into the present day (2017). In 1993 the game was played at Anadarko, Oklahoma, at a gathering of the four major Delaware groups, that is, the Delawares of Eastern Oklahoma, the Delawares of Western Oklahoma, the Moraviantown (Ontario) Delawares, and the Delawares of Muncey, Ontario. The two photos above copied from a video show the game at that time.

Additional Comments on the Game

Lucy Blalock, a Lenape elder, added the following information. She also commented that a woman who is menstruating should not take part in the game. Also, in the Lenape game, if the men were way ahead in their score, the scorekeeper(s) could select some man to play on the women's team. This was done in order to keep the teams more evenly balanced. The selected man played by the same rules as the women; that is, he could run with the ball or pass it.

This author discovered (as did Frank Speck), in researching the rules of the game, that the Lenape people are rather evenly divided on the time of year to stop playing the game. Some Lenape, such as Lucy Blalock, say that the game can be played throughout the summer and fall. The Lenape who say the game can be played throughout the year say that the ball is not torn up at the end of the playing season as long as it remains in good condition.

Conclusions:

According to the accounts written in the first half of the 1600's, an Indian football game was played by tribes both north and south of the Lenape. One account was possibly about the football game among the Lenape. The Shawnees did not arrive in the Delaware Valley until the latter part of the 1600's, and the evidence suggests that the Lenape were playing the game long before that time.

Endnote:

1. The Lenape Land Association was founded by Annabelle Bradley, a school teacher. The purpose was to reconstruct a Lenape village as it would have been prior to 1600 for educational purposes. She was unfortunately unable to fulfill her dream mainly due to the cost of acquiring a suitable land base in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Acknowledgements

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First and foremost I would like to say how thankful I am that Nora Dean wrote out the rules of the game. This represents just a small part of her work of many years in trying to preserve the knowledge of the ways of her Lenape people.

I would also like to thank Lucy Blalock for her further information on some of the other details of Lenape football. Mrs. Blalock also worked to preserve Lenape ways, and taught classes in the Lenape Language at the tribal headquarters in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

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