

Iti Fabussa



Stickball

The Choctaw national sport

Question:

I'm curious about the importance of stickball to Choctaw communities past and present. How was it used to settle disputes between communities? How was it played in the past? How is it played today?

Thanks, Gary

Answer:

Stickball has been the Choctaw national sport for unknown centuries. Generations of Choctaw boys have grown up, stickball sticks in hand, with aspirations of becoming famous players as young men. For hundreds of years, Choctaw women have also played the game; while big sections of communities have enjoyed watching these exciting contests and setting high stakes on their outcomes.

In the Choctaw language, the game of stickball is known by the names *kapucha* or *ishtaboli*. According to at least one Choctaw oral tradition, it was created by a Choctaw man named *Mosholeika* (Swanton 2001:153). Stickball is described in written accounts of Choctaw communities that date back to the French period (e.g. Anonymous 1755), and it appears that by that point the game had already been a part of Choctaw life for a long time. Stickball games, basically similar to the Choctaw version, are played by most of the Southeastern Tribes, and are part of a much wider tradition of ball and stick games shared by Tribes all the way up into southeastern and south-central Canada.

The Choctaw version of the stickball game uses a small, hard ball, known in Choctaw as *towa*. In the past, a buckskin-covered ball was made with a center of hard clay, a round stone, or a tightly wadded piece of deer hide. Today, the ball is sometimes made from the innards of a baseball, covered with an intricately woven leather lace. The ball is thrown and caught with two sticks, known in Choctaw as *kapucha*. Choctaw stickball sticks stand out among the sticks made by other Tribes by having a handle with a square or rectangular cross section, and a cup that flairs outward towards the front. Hickory was and is a favorite wood for making the sticks, although others can be used. Lacings were traditionally made from raccoon or deer rawhide.

The two sticks used by each player are made to fit the left and right hands, with one being larger than the other. The larger, or male, stick is used for catching the ball, while the smaller, or female, stick is used for throwing it. In Choctaw thought, the ball is considered the child of the male and female sticks. The game



Stickball game, Tvshkahomma Labor Day, 2007.

itself represents a detailed microcosm of Choctaw family structure and gender roles and has been used as a basic teaching aid for the youth.

Choctaw stickball is played on a large, flat field, called *atoli* in the Choctaw language. The size of the field is determined by the number of players. Early descriptions of Choctaw stickball mention playing fields anywhere from 100 yards to perhaps several miles in length. Today, the game is often played on a 100-yard football field.

A goal post is located at each end of the field. Today, the goal post, known as *fabvssa*, is usually a large pole set vertically into the ground. In the past, it was also sometimes made from two halves of a split log set vertically into the ground with their flat faces oriented towards the center of the field; sometimes it was made from three poles lashed together to form a structure somewhat like a soccer goal without the nets.

The total number of stickball players participating in a contest has never been important, as long as the numbers on each team are equal. George Catlin described a Choctaw stickball game in 1834, about six miles from the present town of Spiro, OK, in which the teams had several hundred players each (Catlin 1844). Other stickball contests have had twenty or fewer players on each side.

Stickball games were and are major community events, and a great deal of preparation usually accompanies them. In the past, games would often be planned between the leaders of two Choc-

taw communities months in advance. According to at least one source, they were arranged to coincide with the full moon of the summer months (Culin 1907:602). The games often accompanied diplomatic meetings, and their outcome is said to have sometimes been used to settle disputes between Choctaw communities.

Two documented instances exist of the Choctaw and Muscogee (Creeks) attempting to use a stickball game to settle land disputes around the last decade of the 1700s. One of these was over a productive beaver pond located near the Nuxubee River, in what is now Mississippi, the other, over a strip of land between the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers in what is now Alabama. Interestingly, both of these stickball games were highly contested and broiled into actual battles! A game between the Choctaws and Chickasaws in Oklahoma in 1903 lead to a massive brawl that had to be broken up by Federal Marshalls and the Lighthorsemen (Busby 1962:34-35). Thereafter, stickball was officially banned in southeastern Oklahoma, but Tribal people continued to play the national sport anyway. Over the last 30 years the game has seen a major resurgence in Choctaw country.

Today, stickball games are played at major Tribal gatherings, such as the Choctaw Labor Day Festival and the Mississippi Choctaw Fair, held every July. The Stickball World Series tournament, hosted at the latter is arguably the biggest, most hotly contested Indigenous ballgame in the country. This year, a Choctaw team from Oklahoma will be traveling there to compete against the best Mississippi Choctaw teams.

In the past, the day before a game was to take place, the two communities would make camp on opposite sides of the stickball field, bringing their own fires (Bossu 1768). Betting was traditionally a major part of the game, especially for the women. Items to be wagered were placed on the sideline near the center of the stickball field and watched. Families often kept their children away from the game area for fear that spells cast by the opposing team could cause them harm.

For days preceding the game, the players would observe certain fasts. The night before the game, they would be under the care of the team's alikchi, or Choctaw doctor. Prayers would be offered, and herbs ingested to purge the players' bodies and prepare them for the game.

In the past, a stickball dance was usually held before the game. Its exact form seems to have differed between communities and changed through time. During the 1800s, most stickball dances seem to have shared the following in common: a line of young women representing each team would come onto the field and each form two lines facing each other near their team's goalpost. They would dance and sing "Onnakma abihoke!", "Tomorrow we will win!". Then, the male players would rush onto the field from the woods, encircle their goalpost, striking it and shouting. This was often repeated twelve times during the night. Sometimes similar dances were also held on the morning of the game. The lyrics for two of the old songs sung on that day have been written down: "Himmak nittak achukma abihoke" meaning "Today is good; we will win it", and; "Towa itonla achukma abihoke", "The ball lies so handy, we will win it" (Halbert manuscript reproduced in Swanton 2001:148-149).

Traditional ball player dress included only a breecloth and perhaps paint made from clay. Players also often wore feathers or the tails of animals known for their swiftness. Today, players go barefoot and often wear jerseys and shorts.

Traditionally, the players arranged themselves into three strategic groups on the field. One group called hattak fabvssa or "pole men", was located at their team's end of the field (Cushman 1899:185). These players sought to throw the ball against their goal post, or to touch their sticks to the goal post while the ball was cupped between them. Either of these would score a point for their team. A second group of players was located near the center of the field. Their purpose was to get the ball and advance it towards their goal post. The third group, falamolichi, or "returners", would stand at their opponent's goal post and try to prevent them from scoring. Basically similar strategy is used today.

In the past, as today, the game begins with a referee throwing up a jump ball at the center of the field. Players use their athleticism and every tactic possible to try to get the ball from their opponent and score a goal. It was and is an amazing scene: "In the ancient ball-play, the activity, fleetness, strength, and endurance of the ... Choctaw warrior and hunter, were more fully exemplified than anywhere else; for there he brought into the most severe action every power of soul and body" (Cushman 1899:189). During the game, each team's alikchi would stand near their goal post and attempt to call the ball to himself. Following an old Choctaw belief that the sun shining on a person helps him to be successful, the alikchi would sometimes take a reflective object and focus it on his players (Halbert in Swanton).

In the past, the only rules were that players could not touch the ball with their hands and that they could not head butt each other. Fatalities were common in those early games. Today, other rules about blocking and tackling have been added to protect the players, although broken bones still happen. Even after a vicious hit, players are expected to jump up and keep playing; showing weakness to opposing team is seen as a loss of one's dignity. Choctaw stickball players are also trained to keep their cool on the field, and fights were and are much less common than in a modern NFL game. Traditionally, women helped the male players from the sideline, during the game passing out drinks, and whipping the players with cane switches to help them get psyched up and maintain their mental edge (Cushman 1899:188).

Sometimes the game is and was played to a certain number of points, other times to a time limit. In the past, the score was often kept by sticking a wooden peg in the ground each time a point was made; today it is sometimes kept on an electronic scoreboard. After one team scores, the referee again throws up a jump ball at the center of the field.

When the time limit or top score is reached, the game is over. After the men's game is concluded, the women often pick up sticks and play (c.f. Bossu 1768). In years past, after the game successful betters took their new property home, while the successful players and teams were recognized as heroes by their communities. Now, players and fans usually find themselves back in work or school the following morning.

In 1899, Horatio Cushman predicted that the game of Choctaw stickball would soon be dead (189). He was dead wrong. Today, stickball is enjoying a major resurgence. This ancient and passionate game is bringing more excitement to more Choctaw communities than it has at any time in the past 100 years. We invite you to come to the Labor Day festival and watch or play in a stickball game, or come to the Mississippi Choctaw Fair and root for our Oklahoma Team. We think you will enjoy the experience!

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