

Donald M. Fisher  
State University of New York, Buffalo

## *Playing For the Creator:* **Iroquois Nationalism and Cultural Sovereignty Through Lacrosse**

Using evidence found in American, Canadian, and Iroquois newspapers, national periodicals, and personal interviews, this paper explores the efforts of Iroquois Indians to include their national team in the International Lacrosse Federation's World Games during the 1980s. It examines the question of how and why a fragmented community of Indian reservations bound by a common culture and history chose to use the modern version of the game of their ancestors as an arena in which to explore solutions to political, cultural and social problems facing the Iroquois Confederation in the late twentieth century.

Pan-Indian activism, the resurgence of the 'traditional' Longhouse faith, and the development of a sense of Iroquois nationalism during the 1970s all inspired a group of Native lacrosse enthusiasts who believed a national lacrosse team could rejuvenate the Confederation. The two men who shaped the direction of the Iroquois Nationals from its origins in 1983 to the present—Onondaga chief Oren Lyons, Jr. and Tuscarora stick craftsman John Wesley Patterson—employed their extensive experience and knowledge of the non-Native world to bring about the eventual acceptance within the larger international community of elite lacrosse 'gentlemen' in the United States, Canada, England and Australia.

The organizers of the Nationals used a variety of arguments to justify the inclusion of the Confederation in the ILF's World Games. Within the Iroquois community they called for a team to unite the fragmented reservations, provide scholarship opportunities for prospective college students, and serve as a role model for Indian youth. Meanwhile, these men demonstrated their awareness of white misconceptions of, and fascination with, Indian peoples by emphasizing the perceived promotional benefit to the ILF of including an Indian team in international competition.

The inclusion of the Iroquois Nationals in the 1990 World Games in Australia did serve as a symbolic political victory for these Indians, but the team's dependence on non-Native financial resources made the achievement somewhat spurious. Regardless, the team generated greater interest among many white enthusiasts of lacrosse, and also inspired the formation of several reservation clubs sponsored either by tribal governments or supporters of casino gaming and cigarette smuggling.