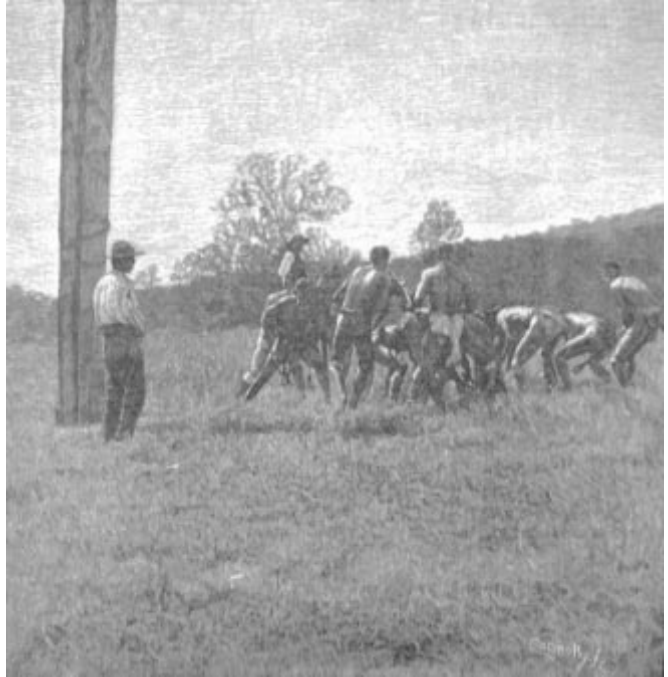


## AN INDIAN BALL GAME.

BY L. N. LUDLOW.

A NUMBER of the different tribes of Indians, more especially those living in the Indian Territory, such as the Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, etc., have a national game of ball which they have played for generations. The game has never varied from year to year, though the methods of playing it differ slightly among the several tribes: The sticks used are made of strong pieces of oak or hickory about two feet in length. At the end a thin flat piece of the wood is bent in the form of a loop and laced across with thongs of buckskin. This is just large enough to hold the ball, which is much smaller than a base ball. One stick is carried in each hand; the wrists are crossed when the sticks are in play. The player is not permitted to touch the ball with anything but the sticks. In fact the game is lacrosse, to all intents and purposes, though it also offers an interesting analogy to football.

Catlin describes the game in his, accounts of the tribes of the Indian Territory, and in his day it was played between the tribes or nations as they are called, with sometimes as many as two hundred men on each side. Where so many took part, however, the annual games engendered much bad blood. They almost always ended in a fight that proved fatal to many on each side and bred feuds between families that further reduced the already diminishing numbers of the Indians. Accordingly all intertribal games were interdicted. Nowadays the games are only between different counties of the same nation. In such games from twenty to thirty men play on each side. The contest I shall describe was between the Sugar Loaf and Gaines County teams of the



ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

(Near the goal post stands a conjurer "making medicine" for his side.)

Choctaw Nation and took place in a beautiful open prairie surrounded by fine old oak trees, above which the peaks of the Cavinal Mountains frowned.

The ball players came on the field just as the setting sun cast its long shadows from the monarch oaks almost across the glade. From far away came a series of weird sounds, a low deep monotonous chant given in regular time, but occasionally varied by the most ear-piercing screeches. The chanting became almost appalling as it grew gradually louder and louder, but it never abated. Soon the players rode into view, about thirty fine-looking Indians, large men most of them, led by a typical brave mounted on an immense bay horse. A dozen Choctaw boys on any kind of mounts they could procure, from a sorry-looking pony to a small mule, rode with the cavalcade, darting round and round the dignified men or urging their beasts in and out between them. Last of all came the squaws and children in wagons and on ponies.

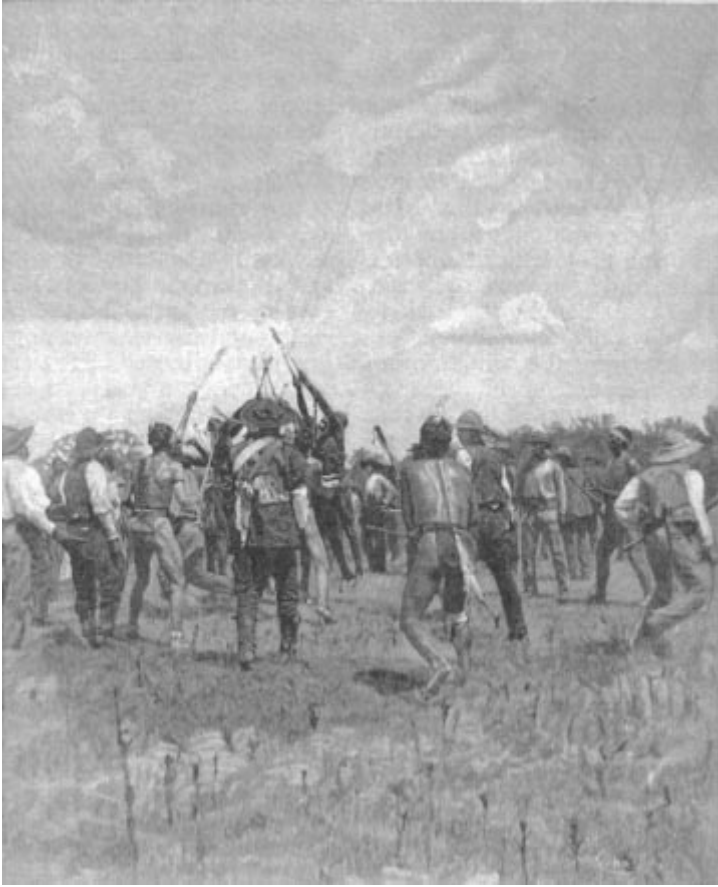
Then from the opposite direction came similar sounds and the opposing team appeared at the other end of the prairie. Following their respective captains they dashed forward at full speed, uttering

their war cries and brandishing their ball sticks. When they reached the center of the field each band halted, saluted, and wheeling their horses rode back to their own goal post. Circling around the posts, each party shouted its war cry and chanted an incantation to their god of sport to grace their banners with victory on the morrow.

After this ceremony the players returned to partake of the supper prepared by their squaws, who always

rebounds inside a line drawn through the posts at right angles to the axis of the field. Two planks set up side by side about fourteen feet long are now used as goal posts in place of the old hewn posts which were put up by the Choctaws in 1857 when they first came to this reservation from Mississippi.

Nearly all the games take place during the full moon, and after the evening meal the two parties assembled again in the moonlight on the ball ground. The



THE BALL PUT IN PLAY. (p. 215.)

attend, and evince the liveliest interest in the games. While the play goes on they carry pails of hot coffee to the players and encourage them with their cheers.

The ball ground is laid out on a piece of level prairie and is marked by two goal posts about one thousand feet apart. The game consists in driving the ball against the opponents' goal so that it

older men from both sides formed a circle in the exact center of the field and there agreed upon the rules governing the next day's play and settled any complaints about "imported" or "professional" players. The athletes, meanwhile, were in charge of the medicine man who, dressed in some fantastic garb, got them into their ball costume, which consists of a breech clout. He

then led them to their goal posts, around which they circled, beating them with their ball sticks and singing all the while some incantation which was supposed to bring good luck. The conjurer also led them in a march, during which they chanted as they walked, until he decided that sufficient had been done to gain them the victory on the morrow. Then they dispersed to join the squaws in a wild dance on the turf by the light of the moon,

The scene will linger long in my memory. I sat on the grass near the circle of chiefs when they were making the laws; and listened to their musical Choctaw language, while a friendly native translated it to me. The still night air bore from east and west the chants of the players under the lead of their conjurer—a wild but indescribably musical sound. There was no other light than that of the harvest moon, and the flashing eyes and the dark skins of the braves, combined with the weird music, made me feel that I had gone back to the primeval days of Indian life.

The next morning the whole camp was up at sunrise, and soon all the country for miles round turned out, so that until the players came on the field we found quite enough to interest us in the motley crowd. There was the usual Western element—men in big light felt hats and high boots and women in far-away attempts at last year's fashions. On the other side of the prairie were the Choctaws—for the "full bloods" never mix with the white people, holding them in more or less open dislike. A third contingent was the darkies, gay as usual and bubbling over with an immense display of white eyeball and teeth, and of all the colors of the rainbow in their attire. But in dress they were outdone by the Choctaw women, for whom nothing is too gaudy. The barbaric yellows, reds and greens suit well their fine bronze tinting, and nothing could afford a more effective background for the exciting, picturesque game.

Soon after we had taken a good position on one side of the field the ball players came running out of the woods on the opposite side of the prairie. The dusky figures, naked except for gay breech clouts and daubs of red paint on their faces, whirling their ball sticks and yelling and screeching like demons,

called to mind all the wild frontier tales that so thrilled our youthful souls.

The captain of each team called all his men together and seated them in a circle while he instructed them in the rules made the night before. All the available men in each county were thus seated, and the captain, standing in the middle of the circle, studied all the faces carefully. Then, walking round the circle, he touched each player that he wanted to take part in the game. A number of very sour visages were left after this choosing. There was no appeal, however, from the captain's decision; and so, after a bit of guttural grumbling, those who were not chosen left the circle to resume their every-day garments and take the chaffing of their friends as best they could.

When two counties are playing, local feeling runs high, and one of the features of the day is the "bettor" or go-between. He is mounted on a pony, loaded down till he looks like the White Knight in "Alice Through the Looking Glass," and carries anything and everything that is betted. He ties the articles together; thus you will see a pair of boots traded for a shawl, or several small articles for a coat, and if the owner of the coat wins he takes everything that is tied to it. Sometimes the betting is carried to such lengths that a Choctaw trades everything he owns, pony and all, but the clothes he stands in. In one case one-half of the stakes happened to be a ball costume and the loser's less reckless friends had to fit him out after the game was over.

At last all the final arrangements were completed, all the bets were made, and the two teams, led by their captains on horseback, ranged up facing each other in the center of the field. The ball sticks were laid on the grass in front of each player and carefully counted to prove that the number of players was the same for each county. The captains then distributed their men over the entire field, leaving about six of what might be called rushers in the center to follow the ball as closely as possible. The balance of the players were scattered from one goal post to the other in couples, one from each side in every pair. Each team placed its best players to protect its goal. The lightest and fleetest runners were stationed about half way between the goals, while

the heaviest men, the rushers, followed the ball to tackle an adversary if he had it or to ward off attacks on their own players when running with the ball.

To put the ball in play the umpire threw it in the air so that it fell among the rushers in the middle of the field. A wild scramble ensued, from which at first nothing appeared but a mass of waving arms and ball sticks. The ball was finally brought out by one of the light runners; but his race was short, for in less than a second he had three men on top of him. He quickly tossed the ball back toward one of his side. That man was also quick, but his adversary was very much alive; so instead of his securing the ball he was grabbed by one leg and thrown with a thud. He pulled his assailant down with him, and they rolled over and over in the grass until the bystanders rushed in and separated them. This was repeated all through the game. What lacrosse players would term close hard checking was the rule, and whenever the ball was thrown to a certain part of the field all the players in that vicinity grabbed each other and hung on and wrestled until separated by the onlookers, who were kept constantly employed at this business.

A sudden fierce yelling marked a new phase of the game. Running down the edge of the field was a light, finely built Choctaw, protected by a big, heavy man on each side. The runner held himself straight with his pair of sticks well in front of him and the ball between them. One opponent darted for him, but was intercepted by one of his big protectors and both rolled over in the grass. The runner held himself in, knowing that the time for speed had not yet come. Another adversary almost reached him, but his second "interferer" pinned the foe. Another man of his side joined him, and helped to ward off the enemies who rushed at him from all sides. His last interferer was presently tied up in a wrestling match with one of the other side, and he had to trust to his own legs. With a quick dodge he darted at right angles across the field eluding all attempts to tackle, and went down the other side like the wind. The goalkeepers rushed for him in a body that he knew he could not pass. The goal post was a hundred

feet off yet; he must reach it with a single throw or not at all. He swung the sticks over his head and, like a stone from a sling, the ball flew straight for its mark. It looked like a sure goal, and the friends of the runner's side set up a victorious whoop; but they forgot the old veteran of a hundred games who was guarding that goal. With a spring like a panther he leaped up and caught the ball in his sticks not two feet in front of the post, and with a mighty swing sent it a hundred yards into the center of the field, where the fight began all over again.

Twelve goals constitute a game, and after five hours' play the score stood ten goals each. The game had gradually been growing rougher, and several players had been obliged to leave the field more or less injured. But now the blood was up on both sides; the captain of the Gaines County team called his men from the field and changed their positions, putting the goalkeepers, who were comparatively fresh, in the front and placing the tired rushers at the goals. He admonished his new rushers that when they tackled a player they were to do it so effectively that he would not bother them again. Some of them followed his directions quite literally, for I saw one man I knew pick an adversary up by the legs and dash him head downward onto the ground, not only once but several times. I remonstrated with him after the game, saying he might have broken the man's neck. "No; wouldn't break," he replied, "I tried."

The spectators, Indian and white, were now all thoroughly aroused, and followed the game up and down the field, some on foot and some on horseback, yelling and cheering their men on. When a mass of players were bunched in a scrimmage the spectators even went so far as to strike the bare backs of their favorites with quirts, or whips, to urge them on. Toward the end of the game the Sugar Loaf rushers were obviously flagged. The strategy of the Gaines County captain was successful, and in less than half an hour the decisive goal was won.

The game lasted five hours and a half, and we all agreed that few if any of the outdoor sports equaled in excitement, skill and picturesqueness a Choctaw ball game.