

## A Visit from Red Hawk

*To penetrate the Indian game, one must enter a world of  
spiritual belief and magic.*

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*American Indian Lacrosse: Little Brother of War*

Robbie was too excited to sleep that night. He tossed for hours, staring out his window at the light from the full moon and dreaming of the endless possibilities of the stick. His imagination spun questions and answers concerning the carvings and writing on the shaft. Finally, after drifting off, he was met in a dream by a young Indian boy. Though asleep to the rest of the world, Robbie was completely awake in his dream, fully aware of what was happening to him.

*The Indian boy approached Robbie and introduced himself. "Hello, I'm Red Hawk. You're Robbie, right?"*

*"Yes," Robbie said, stunned that the stranger knew his name.*

*"And you are now the custodian of the stick?" Red Hawk asked with a broad smile.*

*Robbie smiled back, "Mr. Lewis gave me the stick this afternoon."*

*"Well, it's nice to meet you," Red Hawk offered sincerely.*

*"Same here," gushed Robbie, overwhelmed by the notion that he might be talking to someone who had lived two-hundred years before. Though Robbie didn't ask, based on their similar heights he could tell that Red Hawk was about his age, perhaps fourteen.*

*"When he gave me the stick, Mr. Lewis told me that it was special, but I had no idea that this is what he meant." Robbie continued. "This is unbelievable!"*

*"Well, I know this is hard for you to believe, but through the stick I have been able to visit several other boys, and all of them had the same initial response. They have all been great boys and men!"*

*"What am I supposed to do with the stick?" Robbie posed as an obvious first question.*

*"That's up to you. You can do whatever you want," Red Hawk smiled again.*

*Robbie wasn't sure what was in the realm of possibility, so he asked a more pointed question. "Mr. Lewis told me that I would be able to find out more about the history of this stick through the stick itself. Did he mean that someone like you would be able to teach me things?"*

*"That depends on what you want to learn," Red Hawk replied cryptically.*

*"Can you tell me how you got the stick, then?"*

*"Sure. But perhaps we should talk about some other things first. I should start by saying, Robbie, that we'll be able to visit people and places of the past. We'll be able to see and hear all around us, but none of the people of those earlier times will notice us. We'll be there, but we'll be completely unknown and invisible to anyone involved," Red Hawk explained.*

*Robbie's dream was so real and so clear and he went deeper into its magic.*

*Red Hawk thought it best to begin with a narrative on the nature of the game of lacrosse in his culture.*

*“For any young man in our Cherokee tribe, these sticks symbolized a great deal. As soon as we touched the sticks, every one of us could immediately feel the power and spirit of the warriors, living and deceased, in our tribe. What the French named lacrosse, we called stickball. The game was a central part of our lives as boys, a way for us to be accepted as men. When we were still too young to go into battle with our older brothers, uncles, and fathers, stickball substituted as a means to show our strength, skill, and courage—the same traits that would make us successful as hunters and defenders of our tribe. When we became older, we still played with passion, mostly to invite the favor of our gods, to strengthen our boys, to earn respect for our clans in contests with others, and to continue to parade our physical prowess and courage. It was a game but also a tool that helped us become men. Would you like to see what the game looked like for my people?”*

*“Sure!”*

*Red Hawk walked Robbie through a small stand of shade trees which ran into the shadows and burst out into a bright, sun-lit meadow. This was Robbie's first trip through time and it was to a Cherokee village on the Little Tennessee River in current-day Smoky Mountain National Park on the western edge of North Carolina. The year was 1835.*

*Red Hawk began, "This is the clan of my grandfather, the Bear Clan. They are preparing for a stickball game with the Wolf Clan, who issued a challenge earlier in the summer."*

*Robbie soaked in the lush green scenery, the gentle mountains all around. Red Hawk led Robbie to a small stream where they saw about twenty Cherokee young men waist deep in the water. Red Hawk described the scene.*

*"These players are undergoing preparations for the contest tomorrow. They must cleanse themselves completely. Our tribe calls this ritual 'going to water.' It is conducted almost exactly like the ceremony for warriors going on the war path. It is necessary for each combatant, each player in this case, to cleanse and purge themselves."*

*Some of the youngest warriors drank strong spirits from a jug and immediately vomited in the stream.*

*“That man,” Red Hawk pointed out the older man, “is the village conjurer or shaman. He is responsible for invoking the proper spirits and rituals to ensure success.”*

*Robbie watched as the man wiped ointment on the small sticks and then prayed over them. The boy noticed the interesting shape of the sticks. They were much smaller than he expected, and they were used in pairs. They were not quite like the one he had just inherited.*

*“The conjurers play a great role in determining the outcome of a contest,” Red Hawk shared. “They perform many rituals over the players. They even cast spells on the opposing team to impose poor play on them.”*

*The young men left the stream and began to march to the village center, where they were received by a large assemblage. “This is the ball play dance, Robbie. To energize their team all the villagers come*

*out to offer chants, to beat drums, and to dance. These events will go on well into the night."*

*Red Hawk then took Robbie to the events of the next morning. They observed the players wearing only breechclouts around their waists and feathers in their hair, marching in single file with sticks in hand to the river. "They are going to water again, Robbie. Each player has fasted at least since yesterday. Now once more they will cleanse themselves."*

*The players dipped their sticks in the water and then bathed themselves. As the players waded out of the water, the conjurer 'scratched' each player. Robbie was shocked to observe the blood seeping out of the shallow gashes. Red Hawk brought Robbie closer. The boy stared at the scratching implement. It looked like a comb with about six or eight teeth. The teeth, however, were rattlesnake fangs inserted into a feather's quill. The shaman dipped the comb into a pot of sacred plant juice and meticulously etched the body of each warrior. Some of the players requested scratching in two or three areas—the chest, the arms, and the legs—with the hope that this would strengthen their lungs and limbs for the contest.*

*After scratching, the conjurer rubbed all of the players with ointment.*

*The players then again formed a single file and began their march to the field in step with the beat of a war drum. Some of the players bellowed whoops as they marched. Most focused silently within themselves, invoking the Great Spirit to provide strength and courage.*

*Before the contest started, the conjurers of each team escorted the players to the center of the field, where they faced each other. Robbie marveled at the similarity to the pre-game lineup of his games. The conjurers then offered instructions on the rules of the contest and on fair play. Robbie noticed the goals were about three hundred yards apart and marked by two sticks set about ten feet apart.*

*Play began with two center men battling for a ball tossed in the air. A face-off, Robbie thought. Play was intense. The ball was often picked up with one stick and then carried with the second stick placed on top of the first. It seemed as though the fastest, strongest, and smartest players were the most successful. Passing did not seem to be an integral part of the*



*game—many players simply ran with the ball until they were stopped by force, resulting in a mad scramble for a loose ball. Robbie watched in amazement as several pairs of players dropped their sticks and wrestled each other.*

*Play went on for a few hours, the Bear Clan scoring fifteen goals to the Wolf's twelve. After the game, the players again adjourned to the river for cleansing and finally to the village center for the Victory Dance.*

*“You can see, Robbie, these ceremonies are as important as the games themselves. The Victory Dance is similar to the one we perform when warriors return from battle.”*

*Robbie remembered that Red Hawk had said that his people were the Cherokee and Mr. Lewis had told him that the stick was from the Iroquois.*

*“Did you say that your people were the Cherokee?”*

*“Yes. Why do you ask?”*

*“Well, Mr. Lewis told my family and me that this stick was from the Iroquois.”*

*“Oh, right. Well, we will have plenty of time to discuss that. I’ll be back to see you soon. We must go now.” He gestured to the shadows, and they quickly moved into the trees. “I really just wanted to introduce myself tonight. I’ll see you again soon.”*

The next morning Robbie woke none the worse for having been engaged in such a real and passionate dream. He shared the experience with his parents, who rather quickly dismissed it as a fantastical trip brought on by the excitement of the previous day.