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HONORING NATIONS: 2002 HONOREE

Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse

Haudenosaunee/Iroquois Confederacy: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations

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Officially sanctioned by the Grand Council of Chiefs to represent the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team is the only Native national sports team in international competition. The Team, which has won numerous medals and awards, travels overseas using Haudenosaunee passports, and in so doing, has successfully engaged state departments, embassies, and consulates around the world in recognizing the sovereignty of the Iroquois Confederacy and its member nations. Team members comprise a corps of Iroquois ambassadors who build international goodwill and educate fellow athletes, government officials, and the public about the Iroquois.

The Haudenosaunee—also known as the Iroquois or “People of the Longhouse”—have always taken a firm stance on their sovereignty. The Iroquois Confederacy, which serves as the traditional supra-national governing body of the Haudenosaunee, is comprised of six nations—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations—whose ancestral homelands extend from eastern Canada to the American southeast. Within this confederacy, the Onondaga Nation, the Seneca Nation at Tonawanda, and the Tuscarora Nation in New York maintain traditional chieftain forms of government, codified over one thousand years ago in the Guyanashawnagonah, or the “Great Law of Peace.” In defense of their sovereignty, these traditional governments have long resisted interference and support from the federal government. They have instead chosen to maintain their ancient governments, providing services for their own citizenry rather than depending on federal agencies. For the Haudenosaunee, sovereignty is the backbone of their political existence, and they take the rights and responsibilities of sovereignty seriously.

Besides being well known throughout Indian Country for their resolute stance on sovereignty, the Haudenosaunee also are known as the originators of lacrosse: since time immemorial, Iroquois men have played lacrosse, or “ga-chee-qua-is.” To the Haudenosaunee, ga-chee-qua-is is a gift from the Creator, to be played for His enjoyment as a medicine game that heals and rejuvenates individuals and communities. It is also a competitive game, played both on the field (field lacrosse) and in enclosed arenas (box lacrosse).

As a sport, lacrosse has grown increasingly popular among non-Iroquois throughout the twentieth century. Across the United States and Canada, boys, girls, men, and women play at primary education institutions, colleges and universities, and in community and even professional leagues. The game’s popularity has also grown worldwide. Australia, Canada,

the Czech Republic, England, Germany, Japan, Korea, Scotland, Sweden, the United States, and Wales have all created national lacrosse teams. These national teams are members of the International Lacrosse Federation, the international governing body of lacrosse.

In 1983, the United States National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) invited the Haudenosaunee to field a team and play an exhibition match at the National Lacrosse Championships in Baltimore, Maryland. They did, and were roundly defeated by the Canadian national team. This loss, while disappointing, mobilized the Iroquois into action. Team members and coaches decided that, as the originators of the game and as citizens of the Iroquois Confederacy, they would participate in international field lacrosse competitions and re-capture their status as the best lacrosse players in the world. More importantly, they were determined that their participation in competitive lacrosse should stand as a symbol of their sovereignty.

With the sanction of the Haudenosaunee Grand Council of Chiefs, a dedicated group of Iroquois citizens organized the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team to represent the Confederacy in international competition. They organized a board of directors; recruited managers, coaches, and trainers; and held try-outs for the hundreds of lacrosse players from the six nations interested in playing on the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team. It was the first American Indian national sports team. As such, the Team decided that when traveling outside of the United States, its members would use their Haudenosaunee passports—passports that are issued by the Grand Council of Chiefs, whose capitol has remained at the Onondaga Nation for over one thousand years.

With a competitive and soundly organized team in place, the forty-five-member Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team turned its efforts toward participating in international competition. As straightforward as this might appear—after all, the Iroquois created the sport and introduced it to the world—the hurdles were both high and numerous. Gaining acceptance into the International Lacrosse Federation (ILF) was among the first of the major challenges the Iroquois Nationals encountered. The ILF countered the Team's petition for membership with weighty demands. The Iroquois repeatedly met and exceeded these demands, even demonstrating their ability to organize and host two international competitions to which they invited the Australian, Canadian, English, and US national teams. Yet despite offering proof of athletic and organizational expertise, the Iroquois Nationals were barred from participating in the 1986 ILF World Games in Toronto, Canada. Still, the Team persevered and, in 1987, the ILF recognized the Iroquois' status as a nation, and the Team was officially welcomed as a full ILF member.

Additional challenges followed. Members of the Iroquois Nationals were determined to express their nations' sovereignty not only through admission into the International Lacrosse Federation, but through the use of Haudenosaunee passports for international travel. Although it would have been much simpler for the Iroquois Nationals to acquiesce to US and foreign pressure to travel under US passports, the Team, the Grand Council of Chiefs, and the Clanmothers of the six nations firmly believed that doing so would undermine the Haudenosaunee's inherent sovereignty. In fact, the Haudenosaunee passport minces no words: "You may lose your Haudenosaunee nationality by being naturalized in, or taking an oath or making a declaration of allegiance to, a foreign state." Still, obtaining passport approvals from the immigration bureaucracies of the United States as well as every country the team visits is a daunting task. Prior to every international tournament, the Team must introduce the Haudenosaunee passport anew and arrange travel clearance with the host nation prior to the Team's departure. Even when the tournament's host country willingly extends such recognition, the clearances are not always transmitted to the appropriate

functionaries. Although the negotiations are invariably time-consuming and the process is difficult, the Team and the Confederacy stand firm in their insistence that other nations recognize Iroquois sovereignty.

The Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team has excelled in the most straightforward measure of success: it regularly fields a world-class lacrosse team. In the 1998 ILF Men's World Championships in Baltimore, Maryland, the Iroquois Nationals placed fourth out of eleven competing countries. In 1999, the Iroquois Nationals team took the bronze medal in the Under-19 Men's World Championships in Adelaide, Australia. That same year, three Iroquois Nationals players were honored through their inclusion on the 1999 Ten Man All World Team. In 2000, the Iroquois Nationals won the first annual Jim Thorpe Award for Native America's highest excellence in sports. The Team's ability to endure and sustain the challenges of competition at the international level is particularly impressive given that the Team draws its players from a pool that is a fraction of the size of its competitors'.

The Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team's success on the lacrosse fields has changed the way in which the game—and the Iroquois—are perceived. Although its efforts to join the ILF were met with substantial resistance, the Team's benefit to the Federation is now widely appreciated. The current president of the ILF credits the Iroquois Nationals with popularizing lacrosse: "The ILF and its members firmly believe that the inclusion of the Iroquois has been a benefit to the sport in helping expand the sport internationally." He also recognizes that their play has resulted in a deepening appreciation of the cultural origins of the game among lacrosse players and fans alike: "The exchange of cultures that has taken place due to the inclusion of the Iroquois team has been a truly rewarding educational opportunity for the many nations and players that are involved in our sport." In generating respect for the origins of the game, the Iroquois Nationals have ensured respect for the broader Native American community.

The significance of the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team is felt at home as well as abroad. Among the six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Team has succeeded in sustaining the traditional meaning of lacrosse. To them, lacrosse is a divine gift and there is "medicine" in lacrosse if the game is played traditionally. Specific medicine games play an important role in contemporary Iroquois community life. An individual player may call for a medicine game to bring blessings to a particular person. For instance, if a player's sister is ill, he might call a medicine game to bring her good health. Many players will ask the spirit of an animal for guidance, so that he may have the eyes of the hawk or the agility of the deer. Thus, while lacrosse is a sport pursued by non-Indian amateur and professional players around the world, it is still a medicine game imbued with a special significance for the Haudenosaunee.

Lacrosse also is viewed as a cultural legacy that succeeds in teaching the lessons of how to live a good life. Lacrosse demands teamwork, leadership, commitment, sacrifice, and, of course, physical prowess—virtues that benefit the Iroquois people on and off the playing field and long after the athletic careers of its players wane. Coaches and parents of young Iroquois boys recognize that lacrosse teaches values regarding competition and social interaction. Iroquois Nationals players knowingly act as role models for the youth in their respective communities. As their season allows, Team members conduct small clinics covering game strategy and skills, sportsmanship, and stories of lacrosse's origins. It is significant that most, if not all, of the Grand Council of Chiefs is made up of former lacrosse stars. For its part, the Team's board of directors recognizes the game's influence and wields it to promote positive trends among the youth. Considering substance abuse to be one of the most dangerous problems facing Indians across America, the board of directors has instituted a zero tolerance policy on drug use. In short, lacrosse serves as the bond that brings the

Iroquois together as individuals and nations and, as such, it is used for community advancement.

Lacrosse has deep cultural roots as well as modern implications for the Haudenosaunee: the game not only has a revered place in Haudenosaunee art, religion, and society, but the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team itself is an expression of Indian sovereignty. Through its insistence on admittance to the International Lacrosse Federation and its difficult yet successful engagements with the US and foreign governments to recognize Iroquois passports, the Iroquois Nationals take principled stands about what it means to be self-governing and sovereign. In doing so, the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team extends the role of lacrosse in its players' home nations from being a primarily cultural and religious touchstone to being an internationally recognized symbol of sovereignty and self-government. Other American Indian nations, indigenous peoples, and indeed, nations everywhere can look to the Haudenosaunee and their Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team for evidence of the symbolic and practical power of tribal sovereignty.

Lessons:

- There are many ways to underscore the fundamental fact that tribes are governments with inherent sovereignty. Tribal passports, national sports teams, tribal license plates, tribal embassies, tribal squad cars, and other common symbols of government-in-action are clear signals of self-government. Tribes are right to focus on them in their nation building.
- There is real value to Indian nations in engaging foreign nations as peers. Such involvement offers tribes an opportunity to share their histories and heritages, as well as an opportunity to enhance their status as nations.
- Traditional sports and other cultural practices can serve as vehicles for building patriotism, improving community health, and involving youth in community affairs. Tribal governments can support these activities through program development and the provision of infrastructure and funding.

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