



## Oren Lyons: The Legacy of Lacrosse

Oren Lyons is a Native American Iroquois. He is a member of the Iroquois' Onondaga nation. Lyons is turning 82 years old in 2012. He still plays lacrosse. Lyons will play in Onondaga's first lacrosse game of the season.

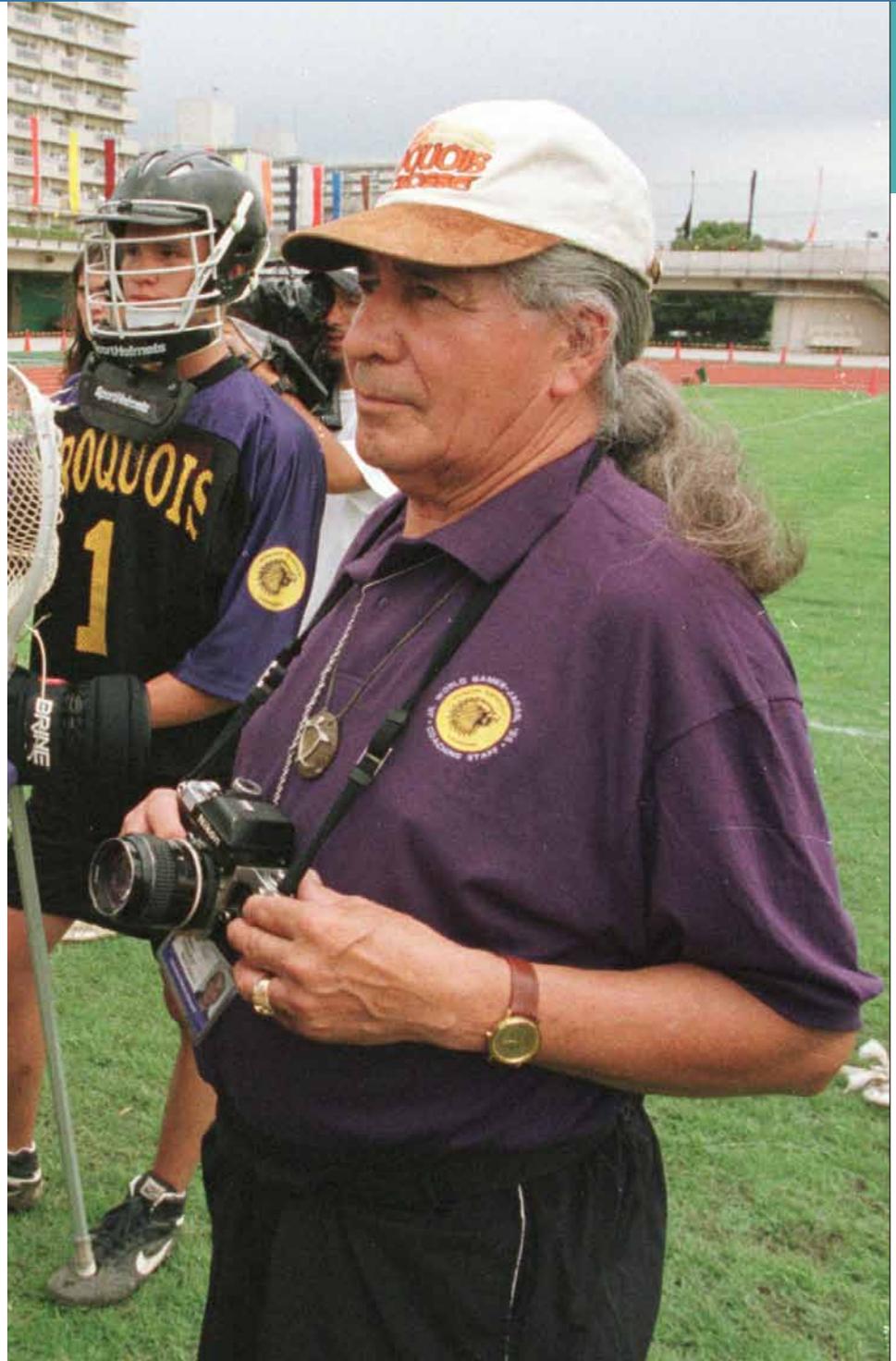
"When you talk about lacrosse, you talk about the lifeblood of the Six Nations [Iroquois]. The game is ingrained into our culture, our system, our lives," Lyons said during a lecture.

Many Native Americans play lacrosse. They play to honor their heritage. They play to be part of a community. Lyons was inducted into the Lacrosse Hall of Fame as a goalie in 1993. He won a scholarship to Syracuse University because he was so good at lacrosse. Now Lyons is a professor emeritus at State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo. He is also an Iroquois Nationals board member.

Onondaga's first game of the season will be a medicine game. This means that the game is played to heal. This is the tradition. Lyons said the game is played "on behalf of everyone in the whole world because that's our style, that's our thinking."

### "THEY BUMP HIPS"

Onondaga is an ancient nation. Lacrosse is called "guh-jee-gwah-ai." It means "they bump hips."



Lacrosse leader: Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons attends an Iroquois Nationals team meeting. This match is against Japan at the 1996 Lacrosse World Championships in Tokyo. AP Images/Itsuo Inouye

The Iroquois played lacrosse centuries ago. Some teams had 1,000 players. They played on fields that were miles long!

Today, there are two teams in a lacrosse game. Each team has 10 players. The players use long sticks with mesh baskets. They catch and carry a small ball. They throw the ball down the field. Each team scores points by getting the ball in the opponent's net. The game has four quarters. The team with the most points at the end wins.

Lacrosse can be violent and fast-paced. But it is medicinal, physical and diplomatic for Native Americans. They believe the game is a gift from the creator. It should be played for the creator.

### PLAYING TO HEAL

“The game itself is first a medicine game,” explained Lyons. It is played to heal. Any individual can ask for a game. They might want to heal themselves. They might want to heal someone else. Then, “the whole community gets mobilized.”

Game day is celebrated with a feast. Everything that will be used during game day — from the food to the ball — must be created that day. First, preparations are made. Then players gather around a sacred fire. They listen to a spiritual leader talk about the person who needs to be healed. Then they hear what the game symbolizes for the community.

“The stick is made from hickory, so [the spiritual leader] explains the importance of the trees and what



America's front yard: Washington-area youths join young Native Americans on the south lawn of the White House at a 2011 event celebrating lacrosse and its origins. AP Images/Manuel Balce Ceneta

they add to this game ... and the deer provide the leather, and he explains the importance of the animals,” said Lyons.

The teams also decide whether they need 3, 5 or 7 goals to win. They agree on a number. Then the teams go to the field. The ball is dropped and the game begins.

“For that moment,” Lyons explained, “all the players are in an elevated space. They are spiritual beings playing for a much higher authority and realm.”

### PLAYING FOR PEACE

Lacrosse used to help the Iroquois deal with conflict. The game prepared men and boys for battle. But lacrosse also helped tribes avoid war. They could settle their differences on the playing field.

Lacrosse is not used now to prevent conflicts. But it does continue

to bring diverse groups of people together. It became popular in the United States and Canada when local settlers picked it up from the Iroquois. Now, lacrosse is expanding to countries such as the Czech Republic and Japan.

The sport is also becoming more popular in the United States. A 2011 survey on team sports said that 218 percent more people in the last 10 years are playing lacrosse. This makes it the fastest-growing sport in America.

Lyons is happy to see that lacrosse is so popular. “It is based on peace and it is based on community, so, hopefully, that aspect is what will help to prevail, to bring peace to the world,” he said.