

# BOBCAT SPIRIT

## CARRYING ON A LEGACY OF VICTORY

*“No Matter What The Score Reads At The End Of The Game, If We Have Pushed Ourselves Beyond Our Perceived Limits, And Pulled Our Teammates And Community Along With Us, Then We Have Won A Victory...”*

BY DR. SHANE DOYLE, APSÁALOOKE NATION



**T**he spirit of competitive fire has blown on the wind in the Big Sky Country since the beginning, breathing life into the lungs and imaginations of supremely conditioned sprinters and distance runners from the four directions, and renewing each day with purpose. Today's athletes at Montana State University in Bozeman are continuing this ancient local

tradition of nurturing that sacred fire of life and bringing out the best in themselves through discipline and dedication. Native people have a presence in the Gallatin Valley that dates back over 12,600 years, to a time when they harvested Woolly Mammoth and shared space with Sabre Tooth Tigers and Short-faced Bears. Their timeless feats of valor and glory carry on today in the living breath of elders

relating them to youth, along with books, and were recorded for the ages through rock art, winter counts and honor songs.

Robust and visionary, Northern Plains societies have always celebrated and honored the pursuit of high achievement and exceptional prowess in life, and their traditional war honor system of Counting Coups reflects these values of courage and dignity. Both before and after acquiring horses, young warriors met on the open plains to challenge one another in physical contests of strength and agility, with winners “counting coups” on their opponents, and losers living to tell the tale. As the Apsáalooke historian Dr. Joseph Medicine Crow once described it, Plains Indian warfare on horseback was truly one of the world's most dangerous and exhilarating games, and in this dramatic history lies the foundation of contemporary athletic competition in Indian Country. Most especially in contests of running and agility, the thrill of victory lives on today and is not lost on Native fans, whose loyalty and passion for their young athletes is unsurpassed.

The roots of basketball culture run deep in Bobcat Country, and the modern style of play has grown and evolved from a shared and open landscape of fluidity, grace, and delight.

Invented by James Naismith in 1891, the structure of the game of basketball is nearly identical to several ancient competitions on the Plains, including “Shinney,” and “Double-ball,” which have been played by nations like the Piegan, Apsáalooke, Shoshone, and others in the Intermountain West since time immemorial. Native players took their style and sensibilities from games like Shinney and Double-ball and utilized them in the new game of Basketball. Just 13 years after the game was created, an all-Indian girls’ team from the Fort Shaw Boarding School near Choteau became first world championship team in history, going undefeated at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. This story was chronicled in a 2014 book by Jack Feder and later a documentary film entitled “Shoot, Minnie, Shoot!”



The success of the 1904 Fort Shaw Boarding School team, although extraordinary by any measure, was just a precursor to what would become over 100 years of basketball excellence in Indian Country in Montana.

Who could have foreseen the dominance that Native teams would demonstrate in this game that was shown to them in Boarding Schools, designed to strip them of their identities as Native people, and

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disintegrate their communities from the inside as well as the outside? Astonishingly, despite the destruction that they endured through colonization, including mass loss of life and economic dispossession, Native communities continue to consistently collect state championships and other high-achievement accolades. This remarkable phenomenon has been recognized and celebrated throughout the state, and the MSU Bobcats have utilized the talents and skills of Montana Native players over the years, from Pete Conway of the Blackfeet Nation to tribal brethren Stephen Davis, and now Kola Bad Bear of the Apsáalooke. These Native

were played with ebb and flow rhythm, and wizardry—like a basketball contest played without half-court set-ups or stop-motion aggression, purely finessed with a spirit of elegance and grace. This artistic and philosophical approach to competition embodied the ceremonial values of the culture from which they came. Counting Coups is a Native acknowledgement of a shared common knowledge that the most authentic and sophisticated knowledge in life comes from a place of spiritual enlightenment.

Like most of my peers growing up on the Crow Indian Reservation in the 1970's and 80's, I became a

and community context, Native basketball captures an essence of motion and endearment that consistently renews our hopes and dreams of greatness and grace. Even as children, it was understood that keeping calm and staying in control of our emotions and actions was part of our identity as Apsáalooke competitors. As a mercurial young man, I was often advised by my friends and relatives “don't get mad.” It was an early insight into a fundamental value of playing a game the Native way—with lightness and joy. Frustration, anger, and spite had no place in our style of play. We learned the value of becoming graceful and unencumbered athletes, lessons that could be applied to every aspect of our lives.

As the winds of change continue to blow across Bobcat Country, we can take comfort in the long and rich tradition of dignified competition that marks our community and region. Our inheritance as competitors and as fans is ancient and blessed, and we should continue to guide our young people towards greatness, because no matter what the score reads at the end of the game, if we have pushed ourselves beyond our perceived limits, and pulled our teammates and community along with us, then we have won a victory for the ages and have left a contribution to be celebrated.

**JUST 13 YEARS AFTER THE GAME WAS CREATED, AN ALL-INDIAN GIRLS' TEAM FROM THE FORT SHAW BOARDING SCHOOL NEAR CHOTEAU BECAME FIRST WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TEAM IN HISTORY, GOING UNDEFEATED AT THE 1904 ST. LOUIS WORLD'S FAIR.**

student-athletes exemplify the talent and ability that lies, often untapped, in Indian Country.

Basketball required a coordinated team ethos, quick and constant running from goal to goal over a large playing field, and honed skills in both passing and shooting the ball/puck into an area similar in size to a soccer net. Along with Shinney, the game of Double-ball (which resembles Lacrosse) was also popular and played frequently during the summer months between and among tribal nations. These were usually co-ed competitions, and included players of all ages. Fast moving and skill-based, Native games like Shinney and Double-Ball

lover of the game of basketball, and for good reason. During one unforgettable decade, from 1981 – 1990, Crow Indian high school teams won seven state championships, and finished three times as runner up or third place. As a young boy and adolescent, I watched my heroes from high school bleachers during cold winter nights, and from grassy lawns alongside asphalt courts in the hot summer sun. Many were my cousins, and all of them carried our hopes and dreams of being champions. When my generation's time came to compete, we honored the legacy passed down to us, and did our best to inspire and pass the torch to the ones coming next. Always within a ceremonial



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