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American Indian Baseball

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From time to time I have watched American Indian teams play baseball and they do so as enthusiastically as all other American teams.

But baseball’s impact on American Indian life (and vice versa) is not something that I have given much thought too until early 2002 when I received a query from New York City’s American Folk Life Museum. Since then, I’ve conducted background research on one of at least a couple of related American Indian art objects, slated for display in the museum’s forthcoming exhibition, “A Perfect Game: Folk Artists Look at Baseball,” May 1 through October 31, 2003.

From my institution, Marquette University in Milwaukee, the museum will borrow a Lakota beaded baseball from the St. Francis Mission School, Rosebud Reservation, St. Francis, South Dakota. Except for a small damaged spot, the ball is fully beaded in size 11 beads using lane stitch and commercial thread. Although this ball’s traditional designs and colors of dark green, dark navy blue, “greasy” yellow, and white resemble those used on balls for girls’ puberty ceremonies, it has been said that a baseball wouldn’t have been used to create a ball for these ceremonies. Rather, it was suggested that this might have been an early-day trophy for a school baseball tournament as beadwork was used for such purposes.

Since ancient times, American Indians made a variety of balls from buckskin and animal hair for ceremonies, team sports, and children’s play. Some were decorated by embroidery first with porcupine quills and later with glass trade beads, such as the Crow Indian beaded baby’s ball, ca. 1885, shown in *Circles of the World*, pp. 66 and 140.

During the early 20th century, the federal Indian Office used baseball, band concerts, and other athletic events to “Americanize” Indian youth and attempt to reduce the popularity of Indian dancing and rodeos at reservation fairs. Indians enthusiastically adopted the game and in so doing, incorporated aggressive ball hitting and catching skills taken from traditional games like lacrosse and stickball.

With baseball came opportunities to transform non-Indian goods for Indian purposes. The Sauke-Suitattle of the Tulalip Reservation in Washington have carved the ends of bats into salmon clubs and with elastic bandage wrappings, men’s dancers today widely use the ends of bats as storage sticks for roach headdresses. Bat handles are carved too and have been made into prized horse riding quirts by Lakotas of the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota. In the late 20th century, beaded baseballs as art have been reported among the Assiniboine and Lakota of the Ft. Peck Reservation, Montana, and the Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota.

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