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New Warriors, New Legends: Basketball in Three Native American Works of Fiction

PETER DONAHUE

In basketball, we find enough reasons to believe in God...
—Sherman Alexie¹

Since his critically acclaimed early novels, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), James Welch has firmly established himself as a major fiction writer with, among other titles, his 1990 novel *The Indian Lawyer*. Sherman Alexie, on the other hand, has only recently broken onto the national literary scene with his two works of fiction, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *Reservation Blues* (1995).² While Alexie's fiction is characterized by bittersweet humor and detours into the fantastical, Welch continues to write with the assured hand of a master realist. Even though these two authors' fiction represents the diversity of writing styles in contemporary Native American literature, their recent works share an important theme: the powerful role of basketball in the lives of Indians growing up on reservations.³

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In the past two decades, basketball has become an obsession on many American Indian reservations. This obsession has brought exuberance and dejection, pride and shame, and hope and despair to the many Indian youth who play the game as well as to spectators. As played by Native Americans, the game has been influenced by various traditional customs, beliefs, and legends. At the same time, it has exerted its own reshaping influence upon these cultural forces. Throughout Welch's *The Indian Lawyer* and Alexie's *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Reservation Blues*, the two writers scrutinize the profound cultural significance that basketball has on Native American residents of Indian reservations, recognizing both the perils and the promise that the game offers.

The establishment of origin stories is integral to cultural processes. The relationship of Native Americans to basketball means replacing the standard history of the game's origin with a new one. As Gerald Vizenor illustrates in the courtroom scene of his novel *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), stories rather than possession comprise nine-tenths of lawful ownership—and stories belong to the tribe, which explains why private, individual ownership is virtually nonexistent within Native American traditions.⁴ The establishment of a Native American origin story for basketball begins in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

In the work, two young Spokane Indian men, Junior and Adrian, sit and watch the day pass from a front porch. When a teenage boy walks by, the men recognize him as Julius Windmaker, "the best basketball player on the reservation" (LR, 45). Junior then explains that "Julius Windmaker was the latest in a long line of reservation basketball heroes, going all the way back to Aristotle Polatkin, who was shooting jumpshots exactly one year before James Naismith supposedly invented basketball" (LR, 45). The two qualifiers, "exactly" and "supposedly," lay out the relationship of Polatkin and Naismith to basketball's origins. The first affirms the certainty of the claim concerning Aristotle Polatkin, while the second undermines the historical record concerning Naismith which the claim challenges. For Alexie's characters—people who harbor a profound distrust of white people—the legend of Aristotle Polatkin (mentioned nowhere else in the book) provides proof enough that basketball is a game of Indian origin. The Polatkin legend, which benefits from the tradition of being orally transmitted, has more validity for Junior and Adrian

than all the history books in all the libraries. And if the evidence of the legend itself is not enough, it is reinforced by first-hand evidence. Later in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, one of the book's many narrators is shooting baskets with several Indian kids when, impressed by their grace and skill, he remarks, "I see these Indian kids and I know that basketball was invented by an Indian long before that Naismith guy ever thought about it" (LR, 127).

Such claims would have been dismissed outright twenty years ago, and today many people continue to condemn them as fanciful historical revisionism. Nonetheless, such claims warrant investigation—including a reexamination of the history books. Given recent understanding into the cultural hybridization that occurs when two cultures meet (as in the adoption and mastery of the horse by tribes soon after its introduction by the Spanish), combined with a recognition of the suppression of minority histories that often takes place in the name of acculturation (as resulted with the prohibition of tribal languages in the Indian schools), claims such as Junior's—that basketball originated with Indians—demand attention.

While people commonly accept that American football derives at least in part from English rugby and baseball from cricket, basketball seems to have sprung from some pure sports inspiration. James Naismith's biographer, Bernice Larson Webb, explains that the single individual credited with inventing the sport came up with the idea as part of a class assignment to create a game that could be played indoors during inclement weather.⁵ The biography points to no antecedent or inspiration for Naismith's idea of hanging a peach basket on a wall other than the class assignment. Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Taylor Cheska, two leading sports anthropologists, say only that the "intriguing history of the game of basketball reveals a development based on felt need—Naismith's weekend assignment!"⁶ Joseph B. Oxendine, on the other hand, writing on the tradition of Indian sports, seems to hedge from granting Naismith full credit by saying only that the game "was developed by Dr. James Naismith in 1893," implying that there may have existed a prior, *undeveloped* form of the game on which Naismith based his version.⁷

The claims of Alexie's characters—that basketball is an authentically Indian game—find possible corroboration in Oxendine's examination of several aboriginal games which may have served as forerunners to basketball—games which

Alexie's legendary Aristotle Polatkin might have played, and with which James Naismith, a student of sports, may have been familiar. Basing his discussion on Stewart Culin's 1907 study, "Games of the North American Indian," Oxendine states that hoop-and-pole was one of the most popular games among North American tribes until the end of the nineteenth century. Among the many similarities between hoop-and-pole and basketball, the most significant is the hoop, which served as a target at which contestants threw long poles. Varying from tribe to tribe, the hoop often measured up to sixteen inches in diameter, only two inches wider than an official basketball rim. The hoops had rawhide netting of a "spiderweb design" woven into them since it was believed, at least among the Novack tribe, that the hoop-and-pole was taught to them by "the ancient spider people." Such weavings closely resemble not only the basketball rim and net used today, but also the original peach basket which Naismith hung from a wall. Finally there is the "meticulous attention [that] was devoted to the preparation of the hoop-and-pole courts." While dimensions and surfaces varied among tribes, these courts were often enclosed areas with timber floors measuring one hundred feet in length, closely resembling basketball's 94-foot long, hardwood courts.⁸

Another native game from which basketball may have originated is Pok-Ta-Pok, which has evolved into jai alai, a popular betting sport in Florida and Mexico. Played predominantly by ancient tribes in the southwestern United States, Mexico, and Central America, this highly ritualized game was one of the few native athletic events which took place indoors. It was played by two teams composed of five players each (identical to basketball) before spectator-filled bleachers rising up from either side of the court, which measured approximately 100×50 feet (compared to 94×50 feet for a basketball court). Two rings were set at a height of fifteen feet (ten feet for basketball) through which a rubber ball was aimed.⁹ Although differences exist between Pok-Ta-Pok and basketball, both games share the central objective of putting a ball through a small hoop, an objective which demands remarkable physical dexterity in either game.

Even if basketball has little connection to hoop-and-pole or Pok-Ta-Pok, the sense of sportsmanship that Indians brought to the two traditional games survives in the attitudes they bring to contemporary sports such as basketball. Oxendine

notes that Native American games significantly lacked the kind (and degree) of standardization and quantification that organized sports in America insist upon.¹⁰ Throughout *Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues*, past reservation basketball heroes are recalled not for the number of points or assists they racked up or the important games they won, as sports heroes are typically remembered by statistics-crazed Americans. Rather, they are remembered solely for the special quality of their play. For this reason, the Indian sports hero need not be a well-established performer. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Junior recalls “the famous case of Silas Sirius, who made one move and scored one basket in his entire basketball career. People still talk about it” (LR, 47). Junior and Adrian recount in detail the single miraculous move Silas Sirius made to immortalize himself. After making his move—of which Adrian says, “I don’t mean it looked like he flew, or it was so beautiful it was almost like he flew. I mean, he flew, period” (LR, 47)—Silas walked off the court and never returned. The game was not even a particularly important one. So while Wilt Chamberlain is remembered for such statistical feats as his one hundred-point game or Larry Byrd for restoring the Boston Celtics to their former championship glory, Silas Sirius becomes legendary among the Spokane people for a single move in an otherwise forgettable game. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Junior says:

In the outside world, a person can be a hero one second and a nobody the next. Think about it. Do white people remember the names of those guys who dove into that icy river to rescue passengers from that plane wreck a few years back? Hell, white people don’t even remember the names of the dogs who save entire families from burning up in house fires by barking. And, to be honest, I don’t remember none of those names either, but a reservation hero is remembered. A reservation hero is a hero forever. In fact, their status grows over the years as the stories are told and retold. (LR, 48)

What enables the legend of Silas Sirius to endure is not the numbers he accumulated in the record books or the championships he won, but rather his single move on the basketball court and the mythological proportions it assumes in its retelling. Junior adds one more detail to the myth when he concludes his reminiscence of Silas by recalling how he “was smil-

ing. Really. Smiling when he flew. Smiling when he dunked it, smiling when he walked off the court and never came back. Hell he was still smiling ten years after that" (LR, 47).

The lack of standardization and quantification appears also in the grudge-match that Samuel Builds-the-Fire and Lester FallsApart have with the Tribal Cops in *Reservation Blues*. According to Oxendine, "One area in which flexibility was a decided advantage was in establishing the number of players on a team. The simple solution was that everyone played, so long as the teams were relatively even."¹¹ In their game against the Tribal Cops, Samuel and Lester take on all six members of the Spokane Tribal Police Department. For the next twenty-three pages, the score is regularly noted in bold print, yet when the game comes down to the last point Alexie withholds the final score, leaving the game's outcome uncertain. In a game from which particular moves are remembered years later—"That shot was the best story I ever told," Samuel said" (RB, 121)—the score recedes in significance. "In American Indian culture," Oxendine observes, "winning and losing were important, but no importance was placed on the magnitude of the victory."¹² The game's outcome can only be inferred—in favor of Samuel and Lester—since they remain on the reservation, indicating that they won their wager to leave it if they lost.

The deemphasis on numerical success highlights one of the central reasons Native Americans play basketball. As Sidner J. Larson points out in his article on James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*, "Indians tend to play basketball in large part for recognition in their own families and communities, a perpetuation of insider values. They tend not to measure themselves using outside standards like college or professional status."¹³ This tendency is generally acknowledged to account for the fact that few Indian basketball players, though extremely talented, advance to the college or professional level. The "perpetuation of insider values" also contributes to the popularity of high school basketball on reservations. As an example of the community support for local basketball teams, Larson tells how one year "when the [Blackfeet] team advanced to the championship game, Indian fans raced home to gather resources to wager, cleaning out the town of Browning, Montana, to the point that the bank had to close."¹⁴ The concept of insider values that promote community pride over individual glory has been extremely demanding for Indian basketball players. In his 1991 article on the basketball craze among the Crow, Gary

Smith points out the apparent paradox that such values often present talented Indian players. While community members might travel long distances to support their high school team, individual players who strive for basketball success beyond high school receive only censure when they leave the reservation to play college ball. Smith cites the example of Luke Spotted Bear who accepted a scholarship to play for Mary College in Bismarck, North Dakota, only to feel that "his people held this *against* him."¹⁵

Smith generally sees the effect of this value system on young Indian basketball players as negative. James Welch, on the other hand, in his novel *The Indian Lawyer*, presents a more ambivalent picture. Basketball provides Sylvester Yellow Calf, Welch's protagonist, access to a successful career in white America. At the same time, the more successful he becomes at basketball and beyond, and the more recognition he receives for his achievements, the further he distances himself from his people and heritage. When a white sports columnist writes an article lauding Sylvester as "the heart and soul of the greatest Indian basketball team this state has seen," he causes Sylvester as much harm as good (*IL*, 103). In highlighting Sylvester's individual glories, the columnist contrasts Sylvester's prospects for a rewarding future with the likelihood that his teammates "will fall by the wayside, perhaps to a life of drink and degradation," setting Sylvester even further apart from his team and community (*IL*, 103). One reason Sylvester had fit in so well with his high school team until this point was the fact that his individual achievements on the basketball court were always understood within the context of his background: "raised in the bald poverty of Moccasin Flats by grandparents...his mother a barfly who had left a long time ago, his father a wino who had drifted off a long time ago too" (*IL*, 104-5). His teammates understood such circumstances; they shared them. As Welch's narrator says, "Somehow, those stories [of Sylvester's parents] made him one of them, in spite of his stardom," but after the article placing Sylvester on a pedestal appeared and was posted on the principal's door, "they felt betrayed by this paragon of virtue who would almost guarantee their failure by his success" (*IL*, 105).

Sylvester went on to play Division One basketball for the University of Montana, a level at which, according to Smith, only one Native American man, Don Wetzal, has ever played.¹⁶ From there Sylvester entered law school at Stanford. When he

returns to Montana after graduating, it is his renown as a college basketball star that gains him entry into a prominent Helena law firm, although he quickly proves himself a skilled lawyer as well. Larson notes that when Sylvester attends a party in Helena with his white girlfriend, "he feels uncomfortable at being recognized as a former basketball star, in contrast to the way he is recognized on the reservation—as the grandson of elder Mary Bird Walking Woman."¹⁷ By this discomfort Sylvester both contradicts and confirms Smith's observation that "the game that was a highway into mainstream America for black men...was a cul-de-sac for red ones."¹⁸ Sylvester succeeds in using basketball to access mainstream America, but in doing so he sunders his ties to his community, which eventually leads him into a spiritual cul-de-sac.

Throughout the book, Sylvester struggles to mediate the conflicting values of Indian society and white society. When he chose to attend the University of Montana, he did so for three reasons: the school had a Division One basketball team, offered a good prelaw program, and was within driving distance of his grandparents on the reservation—indicating that he did not turn his back on his family even as he was being ostracized by his community (*IL*, 105). In later years, as a member of the state parole board—an official invested with the authority of white society by white society—he must decide the case of Larry Little Dog, a fellow Blackfeet Indian. Sylvester's dilemma is made particularly difficult by the fact that he "had grown up with one of Little Dog's brothers and had played many games of horse and one-on-one on a rickety basket nailed to a utility pole in the Little Dog yard" (*IL*, 37). If Sylvester decides against Little Dog, he risks making a decision against his community and, in the process, against one of its preeminent emblems of unity: basketball.

Sylvester's conflict with his community plays itself out through his relationship to basketball right through the final scene of *The Indian Lawyer*. He has returned to the reservation for the funeral of his grandfather, a man who similarly tried to mediate a life between two cultures as both tribal treasurer and a BIA accountant (*IL*, 346). Sylvester has abandoned his campaign for U.S. Congress and instead has taken up the case for Sioux water rights. In the final scene his high school counselor watches him shooting baskets by himself at an outdoor basket. The scene evokes a near-religious atmosphere: "The basketball court was at the top of the hill...so she had a clear view of the

basket, the man, and the cloudy mountains far behind him" (*IL*, 349). Like Abel in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Sylvester has returned home to reclaim his heritage. He accomplishes this, as Abel does, by reintegrating with the landscape through a ritualized athletic activity. For Abel the activity is running; for Sylvester—with "the beauty and grace of [a] man on the court for the first time since high school... with [his] left-handed jump hook, the delicate finger roll, and of course the raining jump shots from the top of the key, the corner, the flank"—it is basketball (*IL*, 349).

The religious associations that basketball assumes for many Indians are not lost on Sherman Alexie. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Junior observes that "Indians kind of see ballplayers as saviors. I mean, if basketball would have been around, I'm sure Jesus Christ would've been the best point guard in Nazareth. Probably the best player in the entire world. And in the beyond" (*LR*, 52). In *Reservation Blues*, Father Arnold, the reservation priest, is accused by his monsignor of devoting too much time to the church basketball league and not enough time to his "commitment to God" (*RB*, 268). The monsignor does not understand that basketball serves more than a recreational purpose in Father Arnold's ministry. Throughout Alexie's two books, several instances of the spiritual association of basketball with Christianity appear, but more relevant are the associations which Alexie makes between basketball and Native American spiritual beliefs and practices.

Oxendine explains how games have traditionally had a "religiomagical" aspect for Native Americans. He cites the example of the Hurons who played lacrosse to bring on favorable weather conditions.¹⁹ In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, one of the narrators says, "I play and I play until the sweat of my body makes it rain everywhere on the reservation" (*LR*, 115). The rhythms of the game seem to replicate the rhythms of ceremonial dances. The same narrator goes on to say: "I play and I play until the music of shoes against the pavement sounds like every drum" (*LR*, 115). Later on, another character remarks that "A ball bouncing on hardwood sounds like a drum" (*LR*, 147). The association between basketball and spiritual forces is strong among Indian fans and players alike. In his article on Ryneldi Becenti, the Navajo woman who starred for the Arizona State basketball team, Gary Smith reports that tribe members burned cedar, mixed herbs with the ground gall of an

eagle, and sprinkled corn pollen to “the breeze and the earth,” to bring good fortune to Becenti before a game.²⁰

Since athleticism connotes healthiness, basketball often takes on healing qualities in Alexie’s work. Oxendine states that in Native American cultures, games historically “were used for preventive as well as curative purposes and for both individual and group healing.”²¹ Among contemporary Indians, a people who suffer from extremely high rates of alcoholism, malnutrition, depression, and diseases such as diabetes, it is not surprising that anything associated with good health might assume a prominent place within the community. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Junior, who was once a reservation basketball star, tells us that as a child he suffered from juvenile diabetes—prior to his basketball playing (LR, 221). He also relates the terrible experience of having once played basketball while drunk: “I felt disconnected the whole time. Nothing seemed to fit right. Even my shoes, which had fit perfectly before, felt too big for my feet. I couldn’t even see the basketball or basket clearly” (LR, 51). He notes that it was the first and last time he played drunk. Junior also sees the potential healing power of basketball when he comments upon the current reservation basketball hero, Julius Windmaker: “I’d only seen Julius play a few times, but he had that gift, that grace, those fingers like a god-damn medicine man” (LR, 45).

The spiritual and healing aspect of athletics has long existed in the Native American tradition of running, a tradition which profoundly influences the kind of basketball that Indians play. Peter Nabokov explains that tales of running, from a wide range of North American tribes, “function as chalk talks, teaching runners how to measure their stride and energy, use their heads, and seek spiritual assistance.”²² For many tribes, running has traditionally served as a “link between worlds, a way of communicating with timeless spirits and powers.”²³ In *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the healing power of ritual running helps restore Abel to good health as well as to his Jemez Pueblo culture.²⁴ Charles R. Larson argues that Abel’s running in the harvest race at the end of the novel is suicidal given his recent release from the hospital and his recent drinking bouts.²⁵ Yet it is running that restores Abel’s strength after the beating in Los Angeles that left him feeling as if “his body, like his mind, had turned on him; it was his enemy” (HD, 101). Surrendering to such a disconnection from his own body would be far more suicidal than the exertion of running a race for someone like

Abel who once "had loved his body" and who "could have run all day, really run, not jogging, but moving fast over distances, without ruining his feet or burning himself out" (*HD*, 100). Larson's argument fails to take into account the tradition within Indian running of fasting for days and staying awake the night before as spiritual preparation for an important race, training practices which likely account for Abel's ability to run under physical distress. Watching the other racers prepare to set off, Abel comes to resemble the gifted basketball player Arnold who, in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, "loved his body too much to remain still" (*LR*, 142). And so Abel runs.

Running remains today an important sport among many tribes, for traditional reasons as well as for the fact that, as Alexie's character Victor sarcastically puts it, "the only famous Indians are dead chiefs and long-distance runners" (*LR*, 73). From Jim Thorpe to Ellison Brown to Billy Mills, Indian runners have long distinguished themselves internationally, although they suffered the same conflicts arising from the clash of community values with individual success experienced by today's Indian basketball players.

In many ways, basketball has subsumed running to become the favored Indian sport. Hero legends seem to have shifted from those about runners to those about basketball players. The Jemez writer Joe Sando speaks of a tradition with which Abel, in *House Made of Dawn*, was likely familiar: "As kids we heard stories about famous runners. In the late 1800s there were Pablo Gachupin and a man named Fragua. They were followed by Felipe Waquie, father of Felix and grandfather of Al, who told me that he ran against the Hopi Tewanima."²⁶ Today, in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, there are Junior and Adrian, sitting on the porch remembering "all of our heroes, ballplayers from seven generations back, all the way back" (*LR*, 52). Among the Crow there is Larry Pretty Weasel, "the legendary Crow player, some people said; the best player, period, in Montana high school history, said others; the one who ignited his tribe's passion for high school basketball back in the 1950s."²⁷ Unfortunately, as with many Indian running heroes in the twentieth century, such as Ellison Brown who died drunk and destitute, Indian basketball heroes often meet tragic fates. In *Reservation Blues*, the legend of Samuel Builds-the-Fire, "Washington State High School Basketball Player of the Year in 1956," amounts to little when he ends up passed out drunk on his son's kitchen table (*RB*, 97).

Despite the tragic ends that so many Native American athletes have met, athletics, whether running or basketball, remains an important means of combating disease, destitution, and despair on the reservations. Lying beaten and battered along the Los Angeles wharfs, Abel has a vision that reinforces the profound power of running:

The runners after evil ran as water runs, deep in the channel, in the way of least resistance, no resistance...suddenly he saw the crucial sense of their going, of old men in white leggings running after evil in the night. They were whole and indispensable in what they did; everything in creation referred to them. Because of them, perspective, proportion, design in the universe. Meaning because of them. They ran with great dignity and calm, not in the hope of anything, but hopelessly; neither in fear nor hatred nor despair of evil, but simply in recognition and with respect. Evil was. Evil was abroad in the night; they must venture out to the confrontation; they must reckon dues and divide the world. (*HD*, 103-4)

Indian basketball is renowned for being a running game. Beyond all other aspects of the game—execution of plays, aggressive defense, flawless parameter shooting, individual acrobatics—running is the quality that most distinguishes Indian basketball from other styles of play. Speaking of Sylvester Yellow Calf's high school team, the narrator of *The Indian Lawyer* observes that "they were all healthy and they all loved to run. Racehorse basketball. That was the way of good Indian teams" (*IL*, 100). In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, a white player is admired because "he played Indian ball, fast and loose, better than all the Indians here" (*LR*, 188). Smith says that of all the "games" the white man brought with him, such as earning degrees and making money, "here was the one [basketball] that the lean, quick men on the reservations could instinctively play."²⁸ Referred to as racehorse ball, Indian ball, or blur ball, Indian-style basketball thoroughly integrates the Native American tradition of running into its game.

Part of this tradition involves running as a means of resistance. The understanding that Abel achieves in his vision about running closely resembles the understanding many Indians have of basketball: it is a means of confronting evil. While recognizing the element of "pseudo pride" involved, Dale Old Horn, a professor of Crow studies and social sciences, says,

"For us a victory in a high school basketball game is a victory over everyday misery and poverty and racism."²⁹ Through basketball, especially when played as a running game, Indians resist, however temporarily, a world that often denies their very existence. In Gerald Vizenor's terms, they reinvent themselves.³⁰ As one of the narrators says in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, expressing his exultation in the game, "I played and all of us warriors roaring against the air and the nets and the clock that didn't work and our memories and our dreams and the twentieth-century horses we called our legs" (LR, 118).

It is particularly the running aspect of Indian basketball that ties the game to Indian identity, pride, and resistance. Runners served a vital role in one of the most legendary, and successful, Indian revolts against European colonizers: the 1680 Pueblo Revolt against the Spanish. Couriers ran between villages spread across New Mexico and Arizona in order to synchronize the many tribes involved in the revolt that would eventually rout the Spanish.³¹ The analogy between basketball and triumphing against all odds seems quite evident to the Indians in Montana, where, though they constitute less than ten percent of the state's population, their high schools have dominated the state championships for the past decade.³² For Crow men, prestige has traditionally been bound to their performance in war, whether intertribal wars or U.S. wars abroad, and according to Smith in his discussion of Indian basketball, "something had to take war's place, some way had to be found to count coups."³³ Counting coups, the practice of racing up to within reach of the enemy to taunt him, requires great speed, quickness, and dexterity. Lawrence J. Evers sees Abel in *House Made of Dawn* as counting coups when he stands up before a German tank, makes an obscene gesture, and sprints away.³⁴ In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the basketball court becomes the venue for Junior, a Spokane Indian, to challenge the BIA chief's son, a white kid who represents more than just another basketball opponent: "I was Indian...and this BIA kid needed to be beaten by an Indian, any Indian" (LR, 189).

Basketball and running are not the only sports at which Native Americans have proven successful. During the first three decades of this century, Indian football teams were among the most dominant in the country. These teams were the product of the Indian schools designed to acculturate Native Americans into white culture—most notably, in regard to athletic programs, the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania and the

Haskell School in Kansas. For institutions that tried to strip Native Americans of their own culture in order to fit them into white society, it seems appropriate that the favored sport should be football, a game that Nicholas Howe has called a perpetual reenactment of the 1889 land grab of Indian Territories.³⁵ Without detracting from the accomplishment of Jim Thorpe, John Levi, and other extraordinary athletes who came out of the Indian schools, it can be argued that the success of these schools' football teams was part of the inculcation of young Indians to the concept of Manifest Destiny through sport. What better way to acculturate Indians than to instill in them, through football, the *modus operandi* against which they had been the primary fighters? The problematic relationship of Native Americans to football is further suggested in the opening scene of James Welch's second novel, *The Death of Jim Loney*, when the alienated, despair-ridden Jim Loney, a former basketball player known for his alertness and "quick animal glance," experiences an unaccountable disgust toward the muddy high school game he witnesses (*DJL*, 81). Watching the boys "bang against each other," he recalls the Bible passage "Turn away from the man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he?" (*DJL*, 1). It is worth noting here that the number of African Americans in professional basketball (75 percent) significantly outstrips their numbers in either football (62 percent) or baseball (17 percent).³⁶ These numbers, along with basketball's growing popularity among Indians, suggest that basketball more accurately reflects certain minority groups' self-concept within American society than either football or baseball, the traditional all-American sports. As the project of the Indian schools was eventually abandoned, the success of Indian football teams receded.³⁷ Conversely, just as Indian rights and cultural awareness movements emerged in the 1960s, reservation basketball began to flourish.

In *The Indian Lawyer*, Sylvester's basketball playing in college helps him to assimilate into mainstream America, but on the reservation, in high school, and on the playground, it serves to emphasize community and resist outsiders. Between graduating from high school and entering college, Sylvester began to spend time with his school counselor, Lena, and her boyfriend, Stanley Weintraub, who came to the area from the east coast. He and Stan soon became "sparring mate[s] on the basketball court" (*IL*, 110), dueling not only for Lena's attentions but, in a manner, for territorial dominion. Even though Stan was "quick

and aggressive," Sylvester exacted his revenge one day by breaking Stan's nose when he "pivoted to the basket with his left elbow out," an overt violation of general standards of play but a move that sent Stan to the emergency room bleeding all over his Rutgers shirt (*IL*, 110, 112). Like Junior, in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Sylvester deliberately retaliates here against someone he views as an interloper.

In *Reservations Blues*, basketball becomes the means of resistance in the grudge-match that Samuel Builds-the-Fire and Lester Falls Apart have with the Tribal Cops. The match is sparked by the antagonisms between Samuel and Lester, both full-blooded Indians, and Spokane Tribal Police Officer Wilson, "a white man who hated to live on the reservation. He claimed a little bit of Indian blood and had used it to get the job but seemed to forget that whenever he handcuffed another Indian" (*RB*, 101-2). One of Wilson's teammates is William, whom Samuel and Lester also consider white. Throughout the game, Samuel and Wilson exchange racial jabs. At one point, after dunking the ball, Samuel says, "That was for every one of you Indians like you Tribal Cops.... That was for all those Indian scouts who helped the U.S. Cavalry. That was for Wounded Knee I and II. For Sand Creek. Hell, that was for both the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X" (*RB*, 117). Contrary to criticism that Alexie's characters conform too closely to the mainstream's preference for vanishing Indians, Alexie demonstrates resistance on a very local level, the basketball court, where politics turns acutely personal for these men. Through basketball—and particularly the slam dunk, basketball's most aggressive offensive play—Samuel takes revenge on the oppressive elements of American culture he sees embodied in the Tribal Cops. While his action can never undo the harm done by the offenses he cites, it enables him to express his outrage and exert his pride. And in more real terms, winning the game enables him to stay on the reservation, in effect thwarting the efforts of the Tribal Cops to further colonize tribal lands. In this instance, at least, Samuel refuses to vanish.

Whether Samuel's efforts—or efforts like his on any reservation basketball court—amount to genuine progress for Native Americans nonetheless remains debatable. Dale Old Horn is adamant that it does not: "It's not a real victory. It doesn't decrease bigotry. It doesn't lessen alcoholism. It doesn't remove one Indian from the welfare rolls or return a single acre of our land."³⁸ In *Reservation Blues*, Samuel's own son, Thomas Builds-

the-Fire, comments on the problems that arise from the inordinate faith Indians often place in basketball. Speaking of his father's younger days, before alcoholism consumed his life, Thomas says:

He was such a good basketball player that all the Spokanes wanted him to be more. When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they'll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon. (RB, 97)

Gary Smith cites the example of Myron Falls Down, a star for a Crow team in the 1970s, who realized that "basketball, the way the Crows were using it, had become a drug," and to break the addiction turned his back on the sport, throwing away his trophies and refusing to attend another game.³⁹

While these criticisms are important, they tend to overlook the complex, though often paradoxical, role which basketball has assumed in the lives of so many Native Americans—especially, even while it appears as mere distraction, in providing hope. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the character Simon asks: "Do you think it's any coincidence that basketball was invented just one year after the Ghost Dancers fell at Wounded Knee?" (LR, 147). He clearly means to suggest that basketball is an extension of the Ghost Dance, the Indian religion of revolt and renewal (and desperation) which emerged during the final years of the U.S. military suppression of North American tribes. Gerald Vizenor picks up on the paradox of the Ghost Dance, pointing out that English was the language that carried the Ghost Dance from tribe to tribe, that "this mother tongue of paracolonialism has been a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people..."⁴⁰ On many Indian reservations, basketball seems to have taken on a similarly paradoxical function. If the game is strictly an Anglo-American invention—which is debatable—then it is a game which Indians have co-opted to make very much their own.

In these three contemporary works of fiction, James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer* and Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Reservations Blues*, basketball creates the same dynamic Vizenor sees being played out in Indian literature: "The postindian warriors encounter their enemies with the same courage...as their ancestors once evinced on

horses, and they create their stories with a new sense of survival."⁴¹ To a great extent, and sometimes with questionable results, Indian basketball players have become the new tribal warriors, and in turn, the stories Indians tell one another about their basketball warriors have become the new tribal legends.

NOTES

1. Sherman Alexie, "Why We Play Basketball." *College English* 58.6 (1996): 709-12.

2. *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); *The Death of Jim Loney* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); *The Indian Lawyer* (New York: Norton, 1990); *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993); *Reservation Blues* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995). I refer only to Alexie's book title, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, even though I cite different stories from the book. By my definition the work is a story cycle, although it has been referred to as both a novel and a collection of short stories. (Characters reappear across its 22 stories as well as in *Reservation Blues*.) Referring to separate stories, especially since Alexie writes sentence-length titles, would only create confusion.

3. The terms *Indian* and *Native American* are used interchangeably in this essay. While public discourse typically recommends non-Indians to use *Native Americans*, tribal peoples, beyond using specific tribal names, often refer to themselves as *Indians*. Since I try to take as far an inside view as I am able in my discussion, I felt that the term *Indian* would be appropriate and trusted that it would not be taken offensively.

4. Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991).

5. Bernice Larson Webb, *The Basketball Man: James Naismith* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1973), 10.

6. Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Taylor Cheska, *The Anthropology of Sport: An Introduction* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 201.

7. Joseph B. Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1988), 241.

8. *Ibid.*, 113-15, 113, 115, 115. National Collegiate Athletic Association, *1996 NCAA Illustrated Men's and Women's Basketball Rules* (Overland Park, KS: The National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1995), 19-20.

9. Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 59-60.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

11. *Ibid.*, 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 15.

13. Sidner J. Larson, "The Outsider in James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*." *American Indian Quarterly* 18 (1994): 500.

14. *Ibid.*, 501.

15. Gary Smith, "Shadow of a Nation," *Sports Illustrated* (18 February 1991): 65.
16. *Ibid.*, 65.
17. Sidner J. Larson, "The Outsider in James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer*," 498.
18. Smith, "Shadow of a Nation," 65.
19. Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 7.
20. Gary Smith, "A Woman of the People," *Sports Illustrated* (1 March 1993), 55.
21. Oxendine, *American Indian Sports Heritage*, 8.
22. Peter Nabokov, *Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition* (Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1981), 26.
23. *Ibid.*, 27.
24. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
25. Charles R. Larson, *American Indian Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 90.
26. Nabokov, *Indian Running*, 189.
27. Smith, "Shadow of a Nation," 63.
28. *Ibid.*, 64.
29. *Ibid.*, 65.
30. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 7.
31. Nabokov, *Indian Running*, 11-13.
32. Smith, "Shadow of a Nation," 65.
33. *Ibid.*, 64.
34. Lawrence J. Evers, "Words and Place: A Reading of *House Made of Dawn*," in *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*, ed. Richard F. Fleck (Washington, DC: Three Continents, 1993), 116.
35. Nicholas Howe, "Oklahoma Stories," *Southwest Review* 80.2-3 (1995), 218.
36. Merrill J. Melnick and Donald Sabo, "Sport and Social Mobility among African-American and Hispanic Athletes," in *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, ed. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 229-30.
37. The Carlisle School closed in August, 1918, after several years of being under Congressional investigation, initiated by students, into athletic and academic abuses. The Haskell School remains open, although it has never again achieved the athletic renown it had in the 1920s. Oxendine devotes chapters eight and nine of *American Indian Sports Heritage* to the Indian Schools.
38. Smith, "Shadow of a Nation," 65.
39. *Ibid.*, 70.
40. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 105.
41. *Ibid.*, 4.