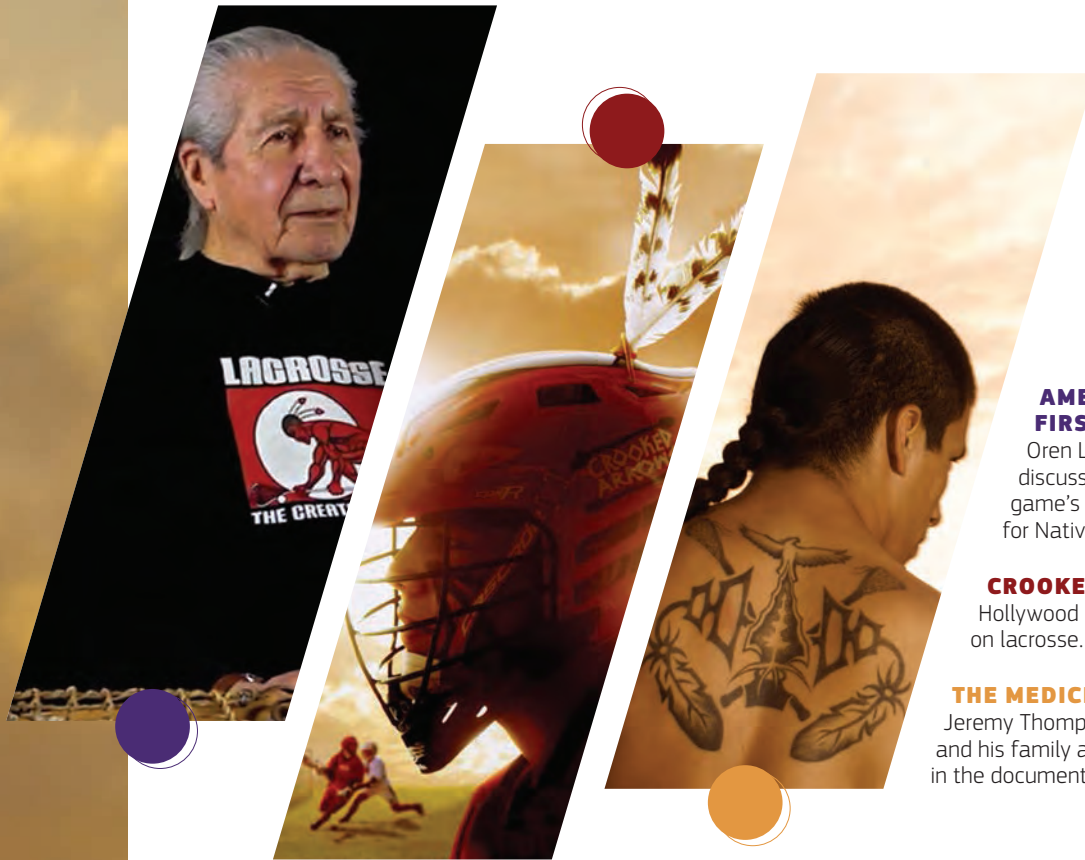


CENTRAL TO LACROSSE

Three lacrosse
films have
intricate
ties to
**SU AND
THE
ONONDAGA
NATION**,
highlighting
the sport's
history
and what it
means
to those
who play it

BY SCOTT PITONIAK





AMERICA'S FIRST SPORT

Oren Lyons '58 discusses the game's spirituality for Native Americans.

CROOKED ARROWS

Hollywood focuses on lacrosse.

THE MEDICINE GAME

Jeremy Thompson '11 and his family are featured in the documentary.

IT'S SURPRISING HIS PARENTS DIDN'T TAKE a page from Native American tradition and place a miniature lacrosse stick in his crib hours after his birth. After all, Roy Simmons Jr.'s father was coaching Syracuse University lacrosse at the time and had developed a canyon-deep appreciation for the sport's sacred ties to Native culture during his many visits to the Onondaga Nation, just seven miles south of campus.

When Roy Jr. was about 4 years old, he began accompanying Roy Sr. to the nation, where they often would buy wooden sticks that had been freshly carved and strung by Onondaga craftsmen. "I enjoyed history and art, so I loved hearing the stickmakers tell stories about how each stick had been carved from a live hickory tree and, therefore, when you held it in your hands, you were holding a living thing," says Simmons '59, who succeeded his father as coach in 1971 and guided the Orange to a record six NCAA titles. "The stick connects them to the sport they believe was given to them as a gift by their Creator many centuries ago. And its origins are in Central New York. To have been able to play and coach in an area regarded as the cradle of lacrosse has made the experiences I've had in the sport all the more special."

In recent years, America's oldest sport has become its fastest growing, and the Simmons family and Syracuse University have played integral roles in fueling that explosion in popularity. Roy Sr. '25 was an All-American on two national championship lacrosse teams at SU under the program's first coach—Laurie Cox. The elder Simmons took the reins from Cox in 1931 and coached the Orange for 40 years. Roy Jr. played for him on the undefeated 1957 team that featured football immortal Jim Brown '57 and renowned human rights activist and Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons '58. During Roy Jr.'s three decades as head coach, his entertaining, fast-breaking style of play produced a 290-96 record and 138 All-Americans. It also helped lacrosse evolve from a regional game popular in such pockets as Central New York, Baltimore, and Long Island into a national sport.

Since 2000, youth participation in lacrosse has tripled, prompting hundreds of high schools to add boys and girls programs in recent years. The enormous increase in interest also has resulted in the release of three different lacrosse films in the past two years. Not surprisingly, there are strong Central New York and SU connections in the production and content of each of the films.

America's First Sport is a documentary researched by Syracuse students and written and produced by Dennis Deninger '73, a professor in the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics. *Crooked Arrows* is a fictitious Hollywood feel-good drama co-produced by Neal Powless G'08, a member of the Onondaga Eel clan and assistant director of SU's Native Student Program. *The Medicine Game* is a documentary by Newhouse alumni Lukas Korver '03 and Jason Halpin '03 that explores the journey of two brothers from the Onondaga Nation as they pursue their dreams of playing lacrosse at SU. "Each film comes at it from a different angle," says Deninger, a three-time Emmy Award winner who spent 25 years as a producer for ESPN. "Yet, each film, in its own, distinctive way, pays homage to the game's Native American roots and shows how the sport continues to be an integral part of their culture."



AMERICA'S FIRST SPORT

Documenting Lacrosse History

The idea for a student-researched documentary was the brainchild of Michael Veley, the Rhonda S. Falk Professor in the Falk College. Veley, the director and chair of the college's Sport Management Program, envisioned creating a body of student-generated sports research that future scholars could reference. "He wanted us to produce something that showed this is how we take sports seriously, this is how we research, this is how we tell

A gift of the Creator, a game played to bring people together, to resolve conflicts, or as a healing game—powerful medicine to heal the sick."

—Narration by Mike Tirico '88



stories about sports," Deninger says. "*America's First Sport* was a research project, but instead of the end result being a 50-, 70-, 100-page report that's going to be put into a binder and read in the future, its final format was put into a film. It has a great deal of information, but it's done in a more alive format."

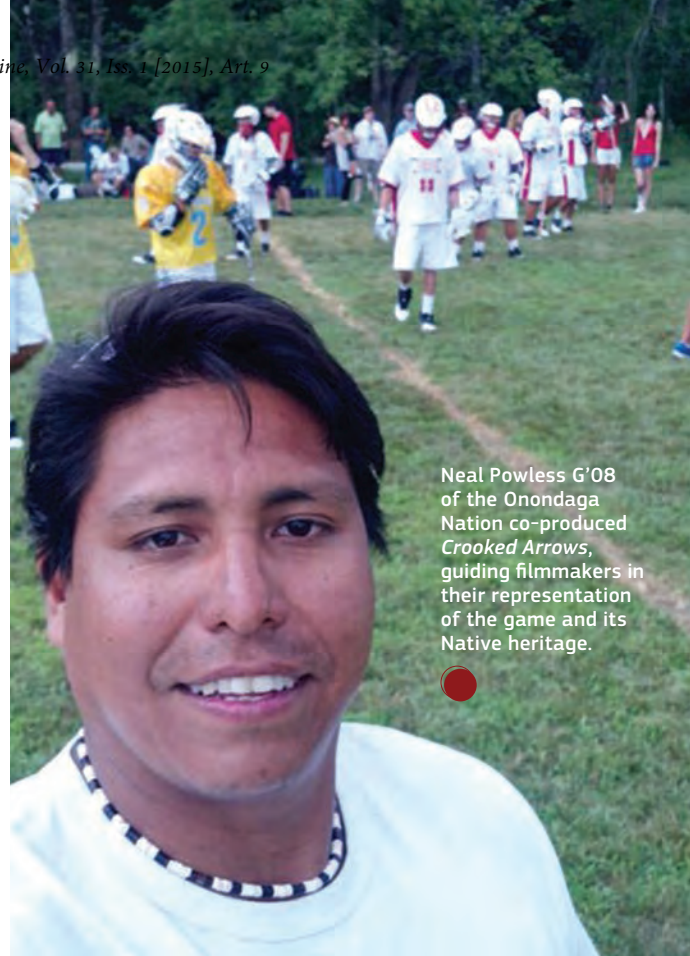
Deninger and students from his History of Sport class determined during the Fall 2012 semester that lacrosse would be an ideal subject to explore in greater depth. "They were excited when they discovered that the earliest accounts of Europeans watching the game on this continent stretched all the way back to 1637," he says. "And they were intrigued by the dramatic growth the game was experiencing and the good and bad that comes with that. So, we decided to cover, as best we could, the broad history of the game and the trends of the past, present, and future."

The lion's share of the research and interviews was conducted in spring 2013 when Deninger and five independent-study students who had taken his history class immersed themselves in the project. They identified 50 people to interview and formulated questions based on their research. "I was aware of the deep Native roots, but wasn't [overly] familiar with them," says Kathryn Jane Wickham '14, a sport management and hospitality management double major. "I didn't know how tightly woven the Native Americans and the sport were, and it was great to be able to learn so much more about it."

Early in the film, narrated by ESPN's Mike Tirico '88, we're told how the sport was "a gift of the Creator, a game played to bring people together, to resolve conflicts, or as a healing game—powerful medicine to heal the sick." We see scenes of Native craftsman Alfie Jacques carving a stick and of Lyons holding several sticks and a ball while telling viewers: "It's in our cosmology, it's fundamental to our life. It's a foundation. You'll see the young fathers with their sons. You'll see the grandfathers with their grandsons. You'll see that exchange going on all the time."

Over the course of 55 minutes, we learn how the Gait brothers—twins Gary '90 and Paul '90—helped the Orange revolutionize the game with an array of flashy shots and creative passes never seen before on a lacrosse field. We discover how SU's dramatic victory against traditional lacrosse powerhouse Johns Hopkins University in the 1989 NCAA title game was a watershed moment for the sport. And perhaps the most poignant moment comes when Simmons Jr. talks about staging a lacrosse clinic in Lockerbie, a year after the 1988 terrorist attack on Pan Am Flight 103, which exploded over that Scottish village, claiming 270 lives, including 35 Syracuse students.

The documentary premiered in Syracuse last fall and aired nationally on ESPNU in March. "There was a sheer sense of pride in seeing the finished product," Wickham says. "It was amazing how much support we got throughout the entire making of the film." Meaghan Lane '15, a Newhouse public relations major, concurs. "I learned just how much work goes into documentaries—much of which the viewer never even sees," she says. "Once it all came together, I realized how much I had learned over the course of the documentary process. Lacrosse-wise, I learned just how much the sport truly means to the people whose ancestors created it. We are so lucky to be able to share in such a special tradition, and I sincerely hope that as time goes on, players, coaches, and fans will remember the game's roots, which transcend the boundaries of history, religion, culture, and family. Lacrosse itself



Neal Powless G'08 of the Onondaga Nation co-produced *Crooked Arrows*, guiding filmmakers in their representation of the game and its Native heritage.

is so much more than a sport."

After the premiere, Deninger says former SU lacrosse players sought him out to thank him and tell him they learned many new things about the sport's history. "That was extremely gratifying," he says. "Our students had done research to tell stories that hadn't been told before. They produced something lasting and that's pretty cool."

CROOKED ARROWS Hollywood Stickwork

Onondaga Native Neal Powless was reluctant to get involved. He had heard rumors the original script for *Crooked Arrows* was rife with inaccuracies and would only perpetuate old stereotypes about Native Americans. After grudgingly agreeing to give it a read, his fears were confirmed. But rather than toss it aside in disgust, he began rewriting it. The producers were grateful and pleaded with him to join them as a full-time advisor. "I made sure I had an escape clause because I only wanted to be involved with something that my people and I would be proud of," Powless says. "If the people running the movie weren't going to make the changes that needed to be made, I didn't want my name associated with it."

As it turned out, they agreed to virtually all of his suggestions, and leaned on him for everything from authenticating costumes and rituals to recruiting Native actors. "I was pleased overall with the final product," says Powless, who was an All-America player for small college lacrosse power Nazareth College in the late-1990s. "It wound up being a story Natives can watch and feel good about and that non-Natives can learn from."

The movie is about a rag-tag high school lacrosse team from

a fictional tribe that gets its act together at the end and upsets a boorish prep school team in the championship game. The opening scene shows young Native American men in buckskins playing lacrosse in ancient times—not on a confined, rectangular field, but rather in a boundless area, through woods, meadows, and creeks. After a few minutes of brisk, bone-crunching action in which the ball changes hands several times, the film fades into the present and we see a 21st-century player in helmet and uniform flinging the ball into a goal. “I was thrilled with that opening scene,” says Powless, who helps oversee SU’s Haudenosaunee Promise Scholarship Program for Native students. “Our game is a thousand years old, so they decided to start the movie a thousand years ago.”

Powless says the film has been well-received by Natives in territories throughout North America. “I had parents tell me their kids watch it every single day,” he says. “It appeals to them because it makes them realize they can be proud of their culture and heritage. There aren’t a lot of movies out there where Natives can feel that way about themselves.”

THE MEDICINE GAME

Two Brothers, One Dream

A friend suggested Newhouse alumnus Lukas Korver should produce a documentary about lacrosse. Korver liked the idea, but needed to find a way to narrow the subject’s focus. His older brother, Erik, had an idea. A teacher at LaFayette High School, not far from the Onondaga Nation, Erik had become acquainted with Jerome and Jeremy Thompson ‘11, two Native American students from the nearby territory who were among the best high school lacrosse players in the United States. “What if you told your lacrosse story through the eyes of these two brothers?”



Erik asked. Luke’s face lit up. “In retrospect, I couldn’t have picked a better situation,” says Korver, an award-winning documentary and television commercial producer whose subjects have included Olympic gold medal-winning swimmer Michael Phelps. “They were great players and great kids and they came from a loving, supportive family. I was able to explore how lacrosse was essential to them and the struggles they faced as Native Americans trying to succeed in a mainstream environment that often felt foreign and unwelcoming. The story had great potential.”

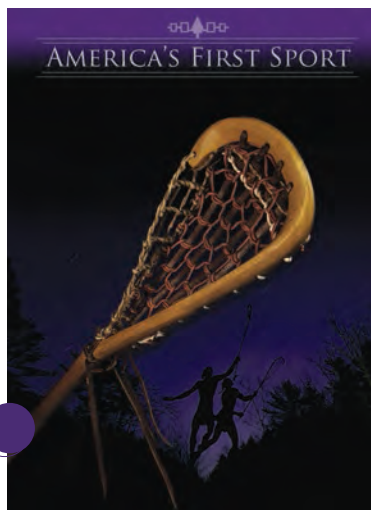
The plan was to follow the Thompsons from April through July 2006, the lacrosse season through high school graduation. But the story encountered numerous unexpected twists and turns, and it wound up taking seven years to chronicle the brothers’ amazing journey. “Their dreams were to play at Syracuse, but



Top: Filmmaker Lukas Korver '03 (middle) with Jerome Thompson Sr. (left), who instilled a love for lacrosse in his sons.

Jeremy Thompson '11 (left) and his brother Jerome battle each other in the yard of their Onondaga Nation home.

Facing page: The Thompson brothers—Jeremy '11, Miles, Jerome, and Lyle—at the premiere of *The Medicine Game*. Miles and Lyle now star at the University at Albany.



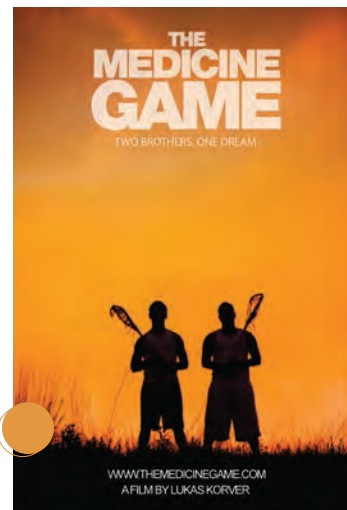
America's First Sport (2013)

Researched by SU students and written and produced by Falk College professor Dennis Deninger '73, the documentary examines how lacrosse is North America's oldest and fastest-growing sport. Narrated by Newhouse alum Mike Tirico '88, it features numerous interviews with SU players and coaches, past and present. The musical score was written by College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) professor William DiCosimo. Production was provided by John Craddock, director of VPA's Mediaworks division. It was shown on Syracuse's PBS affiliate and aired on ESPNU in March. Link: vimeo.com/64675548



Crooked Arrows (2012)

Co-produced by Neal Powless G'08, assistant director of SU's Native Student Program, the Hollywood drama tells the story of a dysfunctional Native American high school lacrosse team that rediscovers its cultural and spiritual soul and rallies to beat a boorish prep school team for the championship. The film, which features a non-speaking cameo by Orange men's lacrosse coach John Desko '79, aired in theaters nationwide and is available on DVD.



The Medicine Game (2013)

Produced and written by 2003 Newhouse graduates Luke Korver and Jason Halpin, the documentary follows the coming-of-age journey of Native American brothers Jerome and Jeremy Thompson '11 as they pursue their dreams of playing lacrosse at Syracuse. With their hopes crumbling around them, they rely on their close-knit family and Native teachings for guidance. Jeremy played at SU for two seasons and was a third-team All-American in 2011. The film aired nationally on PBS.

neither one had the SATs to qualify, so they wound up going to Onondaga Community College, and then circumstances conspired to take them down different paths," Korver says. Jeremy battled alcoholism. Jerome, known as "Hiana," fell in love and dropped out of school.

With their dreams crumbling around them, the brothers looked to their close-knit family and their Native teachings for guidance. Jeremy eventually overcame his personal struggles and was accepted at SU. In one of the film's most heart-rending scenes, Jeremy scores a goal in his Orange debut in the Carrier Dome, while his brother watches from the stands with mixed emotions. Hiana is proud that his brother has made it, but sad that he did not.

Although he grew up just an hour south of the Onondaga Nation Territory, Korver says he "was 100 percent ignorant of what went on there" until he produced this film. He actually wound up living at the Thompsons' home to gain a better understanding of the family dynamics and their culture. "There were American kids, friends of theirs at LaFayette High School, who were as ignorant as I was; who thought that Natives still lived in teepees," Korver says. "So, there's still a huge barrier there. Hopefully, this film about a family's love for lacrosse and for each other can help break down some of those stereotypes. Perhaps *The Medicine Game* can promote some healing." «

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