

A.C. Snow: The chancellor's coming for a visit. **PAGE 2D**

Sunday Reader: "After the Fair" by Sally Buckner. **PAGE 2D**

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Sunday Journal



Postcards from the Road: Auction time at the stockyards. **PAGE 10D**

— the cherokee stickball tradition —

TRIBAL GAME KEEPS PAST IN PLAY



The Wolf Town boys battle for a small deerskin ball at center ground during stickball practice.



At 5 years old, Michael George is the youngest member of the Wolf Town boys stickball team. The traditional lacrosse-like game has been played for generations by the Cherokee.

STORY BY JOANNA KAKISSIS

PHOTOS BY TRAVIS LONG

CHEROKEE

The morning of the game, Wolf Reed shakes out the braids his mother had woven into his fresh mohawk and cinches a belt around the waistband of his long, gray shorts. He wants to win today. To wrestle his opponents into the dew of the grassy field. To scoop up the small deerskin ball with the webbed stick his grandfather made. To run the ball to the goal.

"Get it, Wolf!" his father had shouted during practice the week before.

"Get that ball!"

Two boys dragged Wolf during that practice. They pulled at his limbs and tugged his long hair hard. But when Wolf heard his father's voice, he clenched the deerskin tighter in his palm and would not let go.

The game carries a legacy far more intense than a 13-year-old boy's natural competitive streak. Centuries ago, Native American tribes used this game, a forerunner of lacrosse, which Indians call stickball, to train young men for war and resolve disputes between tribes. The Cherokee called the game A-ne-jodi, and one name for it translates into "little brother of war." French settlers in what is now Quebec watched the Huron play as early as the mid-1600s.

The game continued even as history decimated its tribes. Today, Cherokee stickball is a featured attraction at the Cherokee Indian Fair, held for a week every October on the tribe's reservation in Western North Carolina. There are teams for men, boys and, now, women. Of the seven Cherokee clans, only Wolf Town — Wolf's clan — always shows up for every match. More often than they would like, the Wolf Town boys must split their own team in half and play each other.

This worries Wolf's grandfather, Bill Reed, who has led the Wolf Town men's team for more than 20

SEE **GAME**, PAGE 4D

Pastime nurtures friendship and creates a tradition

NEW HILL

The way Robert Blanchard tells it, one day about three years ago, he called up his buddy Broadus Denkins and said, "I've been thinking about molasses and how we ought to make some."

Denkins, Blanchard's best friend and partner in crime in their relentless pursuit of mastering old-time arts and acquiring antique farm equipment, squealed, "I don't know nothin' 'bout making molasses!" But Denkins knew Reuben Wicker, who did know. Wicker is an old-timer from Sanford who got a yen to make molasses about 10 years ago, planted a cane field and bought a mill and the other necessary equipment. But Wicker had grown tired of making syrup and was hunting a buyer.

So after much visiting, with all the requisite storytelling and negotiating that goes on when an antique piece of farm equipment trades hands, Blanchard dragged

WRITING HOME



Mary E. Miller

home another trailer load of giant geegaws, causing his wife, Patsy, to roll her eyes and brace for their latest historical adventure. "I always tell Robert he was born 100 years too late," Patsy says with a laugh, and Blanchard readily agrees. He's only 42, but this man, who works as a manager for Witherspoon Rose Culture, is most comfortable with the turn of the last century. That's evident the minute you set foot on their property just past Apex. The satellite TV dish is an anachronism, being next to the log cabin he's building and just up from the grist mill, engine house and, yes, the windmill.

Some husbands take up golf or park themselves in front of the big screen or, especially here in the deeply geeky Triangle, indulge in the purchase of computer equipment. Not Patsy's Robert nor Benita's Broadus. This pair scours farmland from here to Pennsylvania, chasing old broken motors and engines, windmills, washing machines, stoves, anything that pertains to an agricultural past. If something is broke, they try to fix it. If they can't, they keep the piece around hoping that someday they'll run into an old-timer who can explain what it was for and how to make it work.

"I don't really know why I do it, or why I love it so much," Blanchard says. "But I drive around and see how much this place is changing and I think we just can't lose all this history."

What he and Denkins really love is hang-

SEE **MILLER**, PAGE 6D



Sweet molasses for all is the result of one of Robert Blanchard's whims.

STAFF PHOTO BY ETHAN HYMAN



The Wolf Town men's team practices during the final moments of daylight on the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians reservation in Cherokee. By most estimates the Wolf Town men's team has remained undefeated since the early 1950s.

CHEROKEE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4D

worry that this new comfort is erasing any need for the old traditions.

"Why don't people care?" he says. "Why don't people listen to the old ways? If they listen, they will stay Cherokee. If they don't, they will disappear. They don't understand."

Reed calls himself a radical, and he doesn't mind if others do, too. A Vietnam veteran who now supervises the tribe's solid waste transfer station, he wears military camouflage clothes and crops his graying hair to his scalp, like a soldier. He hunts bears, barreling through the woods in a thick-wheeled, all-terrain vehicle.

At home, he carves Cherokee lacrosse sticks out of hickory wood and makes ceremonial rattles out of turtle shells. He likes to tell stories about his elders and the days when Cherokee warriors had a clear mission. The stories sometimes choke him up. When his wife sees him talking for a long time to visitors, she brings out steaming mugs of coffee.

"It's getting harder to find teams to play," he says the Saturday before the first stickball games, sitting on a pile of hickory logs outside his house. "The games at the Indian fair are for show, not for ritual. That is not the way it's supposed to be."

The Cherokees had to sanitize the game because people increasingly found it too bloody, he says. In the old days, lacrosse sticks had nails sticking out of the bottom. The netting on the stick was made of wire, and the ends of the wire protruded like barbs.

Tourists winced at the brutality. No more blood, the Indian fair organizers said.

The Cherokee have toned down the game's physicality, but they kept other traditions. The ballplayers still use a shaman and go to water at the Oconaluftee River, where their ancestors also bathed. Reed does not support women playing the game, even though the sport has a hearty following among Cherokee women. But he will not ask them to stop playing. He does not want to be disrespectful, he says.

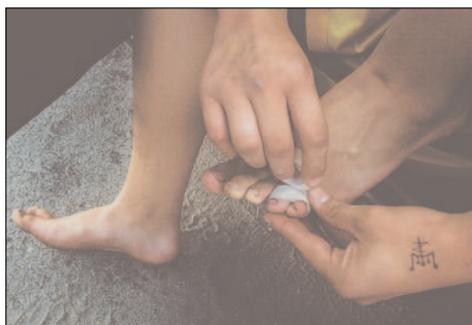
His enthusiasm for the game has passed on to his family. His younger brother Bruce, a 45-year-old construction worker, has played since childhood. Bill's daughter, Lori Ann Lossie, cheers for the men at games, but does not play because she also believes this would upend stickball's ancient tradition.

One of the strongest players on the men's team is Bill's son Denny, who is 35, agile and broad-shouldered. Denny named his own son Sam Reed, after Bill's father, but the family calls the boy Wolf. Wolf and Denny both have long, black hair, dark skin and deep, long-lashed brown eyes. They speak the same way — in simple, spare and rhythmic sentences. Like his son, Denny used to shave the sides of his hair into a mohawk as an alternative to cutting off the locks entirely.

The youngest Reed boy used to be a poor student, but his academic scores have greatly improved since he started talking about wanting to go to Duke University someday, his father says. A natural athlete, Wolf started playing stickball when he was a slight and wide-eyed 5-year-old. He earned his nickname because he sprinted quickly and gracefully, like the mythic warriors who bring his grandfather to tears.

Kerry Reed bandages his toes during a men's stickball team practice. Stickball players play barefoot and shirtless, and there are few rules regarding physical contact.

Reed, 14, is playing his first year on the men's team.



In the weeks before the game, a shaman, or conjure-man, put the trainees under a gaktun'-ta, or a taboo. They avoided whatever would sap their power.

times, that boy puts the ball in his mouth. Sometimes, he clenches it tightly in his fist.

Just once, Wolf scoops up the deerskin ball with the stick his grandfather made and runs it to the goal. He also tries to tackle a boy on defense, but the boy accidentally kicks him in the face and breaks his nose. Wolf gets up, wipes away the blood and runs as fast as he can toward the prized deerskin.

The game ends after barely an hour. Cody White, who scores four times, leads his team to a 12-5 victory over Wolf's team.

After the boys shake hands, they follow their coaches across a busy street to water at the Oconaluftee. Centuries ago, the young men who bathed in this river after stickball games were so weak from hunger and spent energy that they could barely stand. But on this rainy afternoon, their descendants dive into the ancient water and splash each other with boyhood glee. "WOOOO HOOOO!" one of them yells.

Step into manhood

The day after his stickball game, Wolf Reed unplaits his braids and lets the wind catch his long, straight hair. He stands behind a tall metal fence and watches the Wolf Town men play a challenge from a Paint Town team.

The boy sees his father wrestle his opponent into the dew of the grassy field, scoop up the ball and run for a goal.

Get him!
Get that ball!
Run!

The match is over quickly, and Wolf Town wins 12-0. The boy cheers and hugs his father, who messes with his son's loose hair. His grandfather Bill Reed, the men's coach, smiles broadly.

Wolf is already practicing on the men's team. Next year, he plans to play stickball with his father and grandfather.

"I look up to my dad because him and my grandpa and everybody else plays," he says. "But I'm still small." He looks at his shoes.

"Let me say something," his grandfather says. "You know for years in Wolf Town, I was the only one in our family that played Cherokee Indian ball. It made me feel good when my younger brother grew into manhood playing the game. And then my son come, and he started when he was this high and now he grew into manhood in the game. Then the grandson, he comes, and he started from a little boy, and he's growing. It won't be long he'll be stepping into manhood and playing with the men."

"That's the one thing that's kept me going through the years."

The gunmetal sky breaks, and a happy Bill Reed wipes his eyes. Wolf squints in the sun, bearing this talk of inevitable legacy with the mixed expression of a 13-year-old. He sees his friends in the distance, mingling around the Indian fair, and his eyes brighten.

"I'll come find you when I get hungry, OK?" he tells his father.

The boy runs away, fast and determined, slapping his palm on his chest.

Staff photojournalist Travis Long contributed to this report.

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Cody Watty, right, tackles Will West during an exhibition game at the Indian Fair. Of the seven Cherokee clans, only Wolf Town always shows up for every match.

A cry of war

The afternoon of the game, Wolf Reed shakes the braids in his mohawk and leads his team on a challenge yell.

WOOOO HOOOOO!

"Ha ha! I messed up," he says to other boys, who giggle when they notice he is out of tune.

The sky is still gray, and fresh, wet earth scents the cool and drizzly air. The Wolf Town boys have split into two teams, and they challenge one another from opposite ends of the playing field. Each team has to cry out the challenge four times.

WOOOO HOOOOO!

"It's kind of weird with the people around," says another boy, self-conscious after he leads the yell.

Spectators line the top of the hill, which makes some of the boys shy. They include parents and grandparents, football players wearing baseball caps and rapper 50 Cent T-shirts, lipsticked teenage girls munching on candied apples from the fair, and two tiny twin boys in matching orange knit hats with bear ears.

On the opposite side of the field, 12-year-old Cody White leads the challenge

yells for the other team. Cody is a gifted athlete who also plays football, lifts weights enough to have noticeable biceps and runs faster than many of the best players on the men's team.

WOOOO HOOOOO!

His team's challenge cry sounds strong, which bodes well for victory.

Near Cody is the team's smallest and most enthusiastic member, 5-year-old Mike "Little Man" George. This is Little Man's first year playing stickball. The previous season, when Little Man was in preschool, his grandmother drove her van past a field where the men's team was practicing. Little Man asked her to slow down. His eyes looked dreamy, but his voice sounded determined.

I want to play, he said.

His grandmother found Bill Reed and asked him if Little Man could join the boys' team. Reed was elated. He loved when boys as young as Little Man were drawn to Indian stickball. It made him believe the sport and its tradition could have a future. He also liked Little Man's personality, which at times seemed as steely as an adult's.

On the Sunday morning before the game, Little Man sat in his grandparents' living

room in a tiny fold-out chair decorated with elephants and rhinoceroses, watching the cartoons and sipping black coffee from a Styrofoam cup. His lacrosse stick lay below the television, next to action figures and toy trucks.

"I don't get the ball much, but I like to run," Little Man said then. "The older people say a lot of things. They say I'm really good. One of the big boys said, 'Boy, you're too little to play.' I'm small, but I can slide for the big boys' legs, and I can count to 110."

Today, the older boys pat him on the head like a child. But when the game begins, Little Man darts like a fox.

The crowd cheers.

"Get that ball!"

"Get it, Wolf!"

"Run, Little Man!"

A team needs 12 runs to win. Tides of play, alternating between racing and wrestling, move the game. The boys chase the one who picks up the deerskin ball with his webbed stick and runs with it toward the goalpost, which is marked by tree branches. They wrestle their opponents into the dew of the grassy field, often piling on top of the one with the ball. Some-

The Wolf Town boys 'go to water' in the Oconaluftee River. Centuries ago, the young men who bathed in this river after stickball games were so weak from hunger and spent energy that they could barely stand.

At far right, Sam Reed, known as Wolf, fixes a braid in his hair before a game.



Centuries ago, tribes throughout what is now North America used Native American stickball to train young men for war and resolve disputes between tribes.



Wolf Town boys practice for an exhibition stickball game at the Cherokee Indian Fair. Cherokee stickball is a featured attraction at the fair, held for a week every October on the tribe's reservation in Western North Carolina.

GAME

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1D

years. He rests much of his tribe's identity on the survival of this game in its traditional ways. For that reason, he won't support women playing stickball or his athletes talking too freely about the ancient rituals before the game. He believes deeply in his elders, who once told him that he would have a grandson who would master and continue the tribe's old traditions.

"When we forsake that, sell it out, do away with it, that is when we cease to exist as Cherokee," Bill Reed says, his folded arms resting high on his chest.

Wolf Reed believes this, too, even if he is still too young to carry this statement's weight.

Under a gunmetal sky, he prepares for the game. He removes his shirt and shoes and stands with the other Wolf Town boys on a small lawn across a parking lot from the Indian fair. A short wall separates the lawn from a giant statue of an Indian chief emerging from a turtle, asking for transformation through forgiveness.

"Everybody got their sticks?" one of the coaches asks the boys.

The clouds roil. The boys nod, blinking at the light sprinkle of rain.

No other townships have offered a challenge, so the Wolf Town boys will scrimmage again. They follow the coaches along the Oconaluftee River to a playing field at the bottom of a hill. The crest of the hill is landscaped with white letters that spell "unity."

"Always remember that," one of the coaches, Danny Crowe, tells the boys. He is a creased, wiry man who wears two hoop earrings and his long, black hair in a ponytail.

"It's not two opposing teams out there. You're all one."

Wolf watches his teammates, who include fearless Cody White, who is 12, and swift Little Man, who is 5. Wolf slaps his palm on his thin, bare chest as he scans the field, where he intends to run as fast as he can.

A rite of manhood

In the 18th century, Cherokee men proved themselves through three sports: hunting, war and stickball. The ball games had the added benefit of drawing several

The boys chase the one who picks up the deerskin ball with his webbed stick and runs with it toward the goalpost. They wrestle their opponents into the dew of the grassy field, often piling on top of the one with the ball.



Danny Crowe sets up a hickory branch to be used as a goal marker at the exhibition game.

spectators from the tribe, who cheered for their heroes.

As in lacrosse, stickball players used netted rackets to pick up a ball and run it to a goal post to score. But stickball had no other rules, and the players, who wore only loincloths, frequently suffered severe injuries. The games were so violent that a French explorer once mused that "almost everything short of murder is allowable."

The Cherokee played stickball against Creeks, Chickasaws or Mohawks, wagering horses, harvests, crafts and large tracts of land on the game's outcome. Cherokee towns associated with the seven clans also challenged one another.

Historians describe training rituals steeped in spirituality. In the weeks before the game, a shaman, or conjure-man, put the trainees under a *gaktán'-ta*, or a taboo. They avoided whatever would sap their power. They could not touch women or infants. They could not eat certain foods: Rabbits were too nervous under stress, frogs had brittle bones, some greens had stalks that broke too easily. They fasted altogether the day before the match.

The night before, men and women danced until dawn, never touching. Then, the ballplayers entwined bat wings to their sticks for velocity and "went to water" by following the shaman for ceremonies at the

river. They stripped to their loincloths and did not flinch as the shaman "scratched" them by raking combs made of sharpened turkey quill splinters along their skin to make almost 300 bleeding gashes.

Some of these rituals, including the scratching, have not been practiced for years. This dispirits Bill Reed, who wishes the young Cherokee men still followed the old ways. Still, he loves the young athletes as if they were his children.

"I will teach them as much as I can," he says.

Reed, who is 56 and barrel-chested, has played Cherokee stickball since he was

the size of Little Man. He equates the game to a religion. His predecessor was Jefferson Toineeta, a well-respected athlete who stayed on that ball field until he was white-haired.

Reed and his athletes are among the nearly 8,100 people who live on the 56,621-acre Cherokee reservation near the Great Smoky Mountains National Forest. The reservation, in the western tip of the state, rests in breathtaking natural beauty. October turns the tree-filled mountains into warm swells of green, orange, yellow and red. The air is cool, and the sky is often startlingly blue. The Oconaluftee runs clear, the currents whispering over the river rocks.

For decades, many of the Cherokee who lived here were poor. They hunted and raised crops for food and also made crafts. The Cherokee were especially known for their baskets, which the women wove from river cane or splits of hickory, walnut and white oak. The baskets, which were sold or traded, were a main source of income. The Cherokee still make them today.

But the crafts have never brought in a lot of money. Shoppers usually prefer the mass-produced trinkets made in factories in Mexico and sold cheaply on the reservation's main tourist drag. The street features souvenir stores that sell plastic tomahawks and feather headdresses, a fudge shop and photo places where people can take old-timey portraits dressed up in Colonial clothing. At the drag, tourists can also take their photographs with a man dressed as an Indian chief.

Visitors from as far away as Canada also spend hours at the reservation's fancy and extremely profitable casino, where gamblers rub rabbit's feet while pulling the levers on machines promising pots of gold. The casino is connected to an upscale hotel with a cappuccino bar, restaurant and gift shop. Prince sings "Kiss" over the sound system as visitors sipping flavored coffee look at the hotel's Cherokee artwork, which includes a giant drawing of an Indian stickball game.

Cherokees do not argue that the casino, which opened in November 1997, has improved their lifestyles. It has made the reservation millions, helping to pave roads and to attract restaurants and shopping centers. But traditionalists like Bill Reed

SEE CHEROKEE, PAGE 5D