

HOOPS THE POTAWATOMI WAY

Writing is hard for many reasons, but I've never had any difficulty coming up with ideas for stories and books, and my computer is clogged with lists of them. But some of these pieces were conceived by others, including this one. An editor at the Detroit News stumbled upon the Northern Lights Conference, with teams on Beaver Island and Mackinac Island, and thought it would be a hoot to run a story about it. We decided to focus on the Hannahville Reservation team, with the expectation that I would make fun of them and their tiny league. But when I got there, and met the players, coaches, and community leaders striving to make this work, I just couldn't do it, so I decided to turn a lark into a story about people struggling to find their way in the world.

It was about minus-10 degrees during my visit, so the team's plane trip to Mackinac Island was canceled. I came back a month later to finish the story. I've stayed in touch with tribal chairman Ken Meshigaud, one of the most interesting people I've met.

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HANNAHVILLE POTAWATOMI RESERVATION—Jeff Paupore coaches the Hannahville Indian School basketball team, and he's got a problem: how can he get his short, fast-break-loving players to beat the big, plodding Mackinac Island Lakers on their miniature court?

Tribal chairman Ken Meshigaud, thirty-seven, has never played or coached basketball, but he might have received the answer twenty-five years ago.

"I remember it very clearly," Meshigaud says today. An elderly medicine man named Stanley bent over and told young Meshigaud, "One thing you have to do is learn the white man's game. You don't need to beat them at it—you may not want to sometimes—but you must understand it."

If there's a secret to the Potawatomi's phenomenal revival the past decade, from their casino operations to their high school basketball team, it's their ability to create something new.

“That’s *exactly* what we were trying to do,” says Scott Brant, who started the Hannahville basketball team in 1990. “We were just out there to learn, and play the game.”

To do so the Hannahville basketball and volleyball teams joined a conference with four other schools, all of which are situated on the Great Lakes, have less than forty students each, and are willing to travel four hours by bus, plane, and horse-drawn sleighs to play each other in gyms that are often no bigger than volleyball courts.

They call it the Northern Lights Conference, and the games are different up here.

Tom Murphy helped form the NLC before becoming principal at Houghton. He says the four tiny schools started their poetically named league in part because their Not-Ready-For-Class-D-Players at each school “could never beat anybody else at anything.”

In 1987, Grand Marais and Paradise, both on the picturesque northern shore of the Upper Peninsula, formed their new league with Mackinac Island and Beaver Island, located right in the middle of Lake Michigan. It is probably the only league where you can get to all the member schools by sailboat.

One summer Murphy did just that, and concluded, “It has to be the most scenic athletic league in the nation.”

In 1990, the Hannahville Indian School, located on the Hannahville Indian Reservation just thirteen miles west of Escanaba, became the fifth member of the circuit.

All five schools are near beautiful tourist areas that thrive in the summer and stagnate in the winter. The school leaders were desperate to offer a healthy alternative for mischief during the long winter months and create an incentive for studying in the bargain.

Despite the comfortable fit, the Hannahville basketball and volleyball teams had a hard time learning “the white man’s game.”

They lost every game their first year. During a practice near the end of the season, Brant passed a ball to one of his five remaining players and broke the kid’s finger, forcing them to forfeit their last weekend.

They lost every game their second year, too—but at least they played them all.

In Jeff Paupore’s second year as coach, Hannahville already has four league wins entering its final contest with Mackinac Island. Not bad for a team whose roster includes a ninth-grade boy, an eighth-grade girl and just five other players. In the miniature Northern Lights gyms the overaggress-

sive Eagles often foul out, forcing them to finish their games with only three or four players left on the court.

Fouls are a bitch.

The Mackinac Island team has three advantages: more experience, fifteen basketball players, and a quaint colonial gym that's less than half the area of Hannahville's full-sized hardwood. A half-court shot on the Island is equivalent to an NBA "three."

It was not surprising when the Lakers drubbed the Hannahville Soaring Eagles in their first game six years ago, 113–26. Last year, the Eagles lost both games on Mackinac Island's quirky court, 116–41 and 117–67. But eyebrows rose earlier this year when Hannahville went into the fourth quarter at home against the Lakers tied 32–32, before self-destructing.

To beat the Lakers, Hannahville will have to understand their opponents' game, while sticking to their own.

When you see the Nah-Tah-Wahsh ("Soaring Eagles") team play ball in their state-of-the-art gym, wearing their expensive Russell uniforms, it's hard to believe that just fifteen years ago some houses on the reservation still had dirt floors; that ten years ago the school was just a ragtag collection of leaky-roofed sheds that were so cold students wore coats during class and so rickety some were condemned; and that just five years ago only 10 percent of the 104 Hannahville homes had phones.

Today, 19 percent of those homes have computers.

To get to where they are, the Potawatomi have had to struggle for two hundred years against the dual forces of "Chimokomin" (white people) and alcohol.

Ken Meshigaud's Potawatomi ancestors were forced off their Lower Peninsula homeland in 1822. Michigan territorial governor Lewis Cass shamelessly exploited the Potawatomi's weakness for alcohol by putting the Potawatomi leaders and a huge store of whiskey in the same Chicago meeting room for "treaty negotiations."

For two weeks, the Anishnawbe ("original people") held onto their land and Cass held onto his liquor, until finally one leader broke down and pleaded: "We care not for the land, the money or the goods," he said. "It is the whiskey we want—give us the whiskey."

Though President Jackson ordered the Potawatomi to Kansas, about six thousand resilient souls slipped away to Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, as it was called then. The tribe wandered homeless until 1913, when Congress gave them the 3,359 acres they named "Hannahville," after a sympathetic missionary's wife.

Despite the government's concerted efforts, the Michigan Potawatomi survived.

Of course, surviving and thriving aren't the same thing. The reservation didn't get electricity until 1966, and their own one-room schoolhouse until 1975, but things didn't really take off until Ken Meshigaud and the casino transformed the tribe forever.

The Chip-In Casino sits on the edge of the reservation and brings in about \$7 million a year. Unlike one Minnesota tribe that lines its members' pockets with \$20,000 a month, the Potawatomi give only \$1,000 a year to each full tribal member. The rest goes to projects like the new water tower, natural gas pipelines, three dozen new tract homes a year, a \$1.2 million health center, and, not least, the \$4.5 million new school.

Changing habits is even more important than changing the landscape. Of all the habits the Anishnawbe adopted from the white man, the most destructive by far is drinking. Nationally, Native Americans are four times more likely to suffer cirrhosis of the liver and fatal alcohol-related accidents than non-Natives, and three times more likely to commit suicide and homicide.

"My father would sometimes go a week or two without coming back to the house," Meshigaud says of his alcoholic father. "We'd have no food, no kerosene for the lamps. A lot of us [on the reservation] didn't grow up with the 'do-your-best' ethic, because of the substance abuse problem in those families."

If the rest of the nation is waging a war on drugs and alcohol, the Potawatomi have mounted a full-fledged blitzkrieg. According to Carol Bergquist, an independent researcher invited to study the tribe, since 1990 the percentage of active drinkers has dropped by 69 percent, and is still falling.

The tribe also offers programs on everything from job-seeking skills to parenting workshops to vocational training, and the results of their efforts are staggering: in the last twenty years the Potawatomi's graduation rate has grown from 15 percent to 75 percent. In the last five years, their unemployment rate dropped from 85 percent to 14 percent, while their average household income has almost doubled, from about \$14,000 to \$25,000.

The Potawatomi have made all these changes without losing their culture, their language, or their easygoing ways. "If I'm at a ten o'clock meeting and it's 10:10, I start stressing out," says Carol Bergquist. "They laugh and calm me down. 'Carol, the meeting starts when everyone who needs to be here is here.'

"It's the coolest place to work," she says.

In the same way casino jobs provide adults incentive to stay sober and graduate from high school, the Nah-Tah-Wahsh sports teams provide the kids incentive to study and behave.

"The whole idea was to use athletics to encourage better academics," says Scott Brant, the team's founder. "Winning meant nothing to us."

Sports also keep idle hands busy.

"If I haven't got anything else to do, I'll make trouble or play basketball," admits Joe "Red Cloud" Sagataw, their star point guard.

Fortunately, Joe and the other Potawatomi kids get plenty of opportunities to play ball, including "Rec Night" pickup games in the school gym from seven to nine.

Although the basketball game is fast and fluid, you notice a conspicuous lack of trash-talking, foul-calling, and post-basket celebrating. It's eerily peaceful, like a TV game with the sound turned off, which might be expected from the descendants of a chief named "He Who Sits Quietly."

But make no mistake: they love their hoops. There are so many baskets tacked onto the homes along Hannahville's grid of two-lane roads that the 3,359-acre reservation looks a lot more like the Indiana countryside than anything you've seen from Hollywood. About a third of the students at Hannahville wear NBA garb to school, and if you tell them you work for the *Detroit News*, they'll invariably ask if you've met the Pistons' Grant Hill.

The reservation's primary pastime is no longer drinking, but basketball.

Joe Sagataw, the grandson of the former tribal chairman Omar Sagataw, has over one hundred cousins, but he's starting to stick out from the pack.

The fifteen-year-old junior is the team's leading scorer heading into the season's last game, just like his cousin Kenny Wandahsega was three years ago. Kenny was everything Joe aspired to be: the star point guard, a promising student, and a popular young man with both adults and kids.

"I look at Joe and he reminds me of Kenny—a spittin' image," says Mike Philemon, who was Kenny Wandahsega's best friend. "They're both good athletes, naturals. They even look the same out there on the court. Joe looked up to Kenny—but a lot of people did."

On August 4, 1994, Wandahsega and his friends were drinking along the banks of the powerful Menominee River. When Wandahsega jumped in, the current pulled him under and trapped him under the bank, where the search team found him four days later. People in Hannahville have still not gotten over the loss of Kenny Wandahsega—especially Joe Sagataw.

"We were as close as we could have been," Sagataw says quietly, "but he screwed it all up himself."

With Kenny's tragedy as motivation, Joe Sagataw seems doubly determined to make the most of his opportunities. His classmates voted him the "brightest student" and president of the student council. A few years ago Joe skipped a grade as casually as some kids skip class.

"I was sitting in class one day," Sagataw recalls, "and they said, 'Here's your new class.'"

Joe Sagataw dreams of going to college and then law school, but he lives in a modest home with no phone. If Governor Engler cuts tuition aid to Native Americans, it's highly unlikely Sagataw will be able to afford it.

"I figure if I can just keep from endangering myself," Sagataw says, "maybe I can do some of the things Kenny couldn't."

The trip to Mackinac Island requires four hours and three vehicles. Normally they would sleep over and play another game the next morning, but this midweek makeup game won't allow for that.

For some of the kids the trip is a chance to go on their first plane ride. For others it's a rare opportunity to get off the reservation. But for seasoned travelers like Joe and his longtime girlfriend Rosie, who plays on the volleyball team, it's simply a good time to take a nap next to each other in the back seat.

The highlight of the journey is not the five-minute plane ride across Lake Michigan's frozen surface, but the thirty-minute trip from Mackinac Island's tiny airport to its tiny high school in a sleigh pulled by two Percheron horses. The dirt-free snow on the Mackinac Island roads is so white it looks bleached. The scene is akin to a Budweiser ad—except for the three players bumper-skiing off the back.

When the driver eases the packed cart down to the redbrick high school, the kids ignore the Grand Hotel nearby to point to the incredibly small gym. A young referee is already there, shaking his head. "My partner told me it was small, but . . ."

As the boys get dressed in a three-stall bathroom, some of them sitting on toilet seats to tie their shoes, the volleyball players try to learn how to carom their passes off the impossibly low ceiling, which is allowed in this gym. It's so small the volleyball players have to run in from an open doorway to serve the ball.

Coach Jeff Paupore seems caught in between the two worlds he lives in.

"It's a different game, coaching these kids," he says outside the bathroom which is serving as the team's locker room. "They don't see orga-

nized ball until high school, so the pick-and-roll, double-dribbling, even checking in at the scorer's table—it's all new to them."

He's had to learn a few things, too, starting with his players' mental approach to the game.

"They don't get all psyched up before games," he says. "They're not bothered by losing like I am—which I think is a positive. They're not caught up in our rat race."

Minutes before game time the basketball players listen to their coach's pregame talk in the hallway, sitting under the grade-schoolers' coat hooks and snowmobile helmets. In the Northern Lights Conference, teams spend as much time preparing for their opponents' gym as they do for their opponents' players.

"You can forget about fast-breaking there, because there's no place to fast-break to!" Paupore says, his throat muscles straining. "This is their court, they know how to frustrate you. Remember, there are no losers if you just play hard. Just keep your heads out there."

Basketball in this gym feels less like a sanctioned high school contest than a college dorm-room nerf-hoops game. But when the game starts, the Eagles snap out of their pregame trance and rebound, pass, and drive like they're late for the plane home.

In the first minute Joe Sagataw grabs the ball under his own bucket. He starts running low like a sprinter leaving the blocks, his tail of black hair flying behind him like a mustang's mane, when he suddenly cuts toward the hoop and uncoils for a graceful layup. A couple minutes later Joe feeds the ball into center James Larson, who fakes going up, turns around, and swishes a four-footer—and does it again a minute later.

When forward Tonto Wandahsega looks up at the scoreboard it reads: Home 6, Visitors 10.

"Hey man, we're ahead!" he says, pleasantly surprised.

In the first four minutes the Eagles combined the best of the two styles of play, fast and slow, but they forget Paupore's advice when play resumes. Sagataw repeatedly drives the lane, but once he's inside the paint, he has no room to stretch toward the bucket. Things usually come easily for the talented Joe Sagataw—and when they don't, he gets frustrated.

With the Lakers in the midst of a 22–8 third quarter run, Sagataw stubbornly tries to go to the bucket once more, only to find three big men waiting for him. After they knock the ball away, Sagataw watches helplessly as it rolls into Laker hands, then tries to trip the guy who picked it up on the way back up the court, getting a technical foul in the process.

Coach Paupore has seen this before, so he pulls Sagataw to cool off on

the bench, while James Larson puts his basic block-and-tackle post moves to good use. His buckets keep the Soaring Eagles within forty points mid-way through the fourth quarter.

The effort is good enough for their pom-pom girls, who seem unable to finish a cheer without giggling at the end. Their spontaneous encouragement for every pass and shot, whether good or not, is touching. The Laker fans join their clapping when Jeannie Wandahsega, nursing two floor burns from the volleyball game earlier that day, checks in for Hannahville.

When she goes in, Joe Sagataw collects himself and returns to the court. Like his team, just when you think Joe's about to unravel, he comes back stronger. He calls a play at the top of the key, and patiently works the ball around until James Larson gets open down low. Sagataw gives him the ball for Larson's trademark turnaround jump shot. The Eagles do it again and keep doing it, forcing the Lakers to take fouls or let Hannahville make easy buckets. When the game ends the Lakers have more fouls than the Eagles.

No, it's not a victory—the Lakers win, 90–55—but no one fouled out this time, and it sure beats the wash-outs during last year's games here. After the game Joe talks to Rosie about the speech he will give at school the next day on the perils of drunk driving—a manifestation of Scott Brant's saying, "Our wins and losses happen off the court."

When they hop on the horse-drawn wagon waiting outside the gym to take them back to the airport, Tonto Wandahsega asks, "Who had fun?" then answers his own question. "I had fun. I had fun just playing."

And that's when it hits you: these kids don't hustle at the end of a 90–55 loss to cut the margin, to be martyrs, or to hear their coach's praise. They dive for loose balls with a minute left simply because the ball's in play.

When you've traveled as far as the Potawatomi have, the difference between winning and losing a basketball game is meaningless. As Stanley the medicine man once said, the important thing is not winning the game, but learning it.

For Hannahville, that's victory enough—for now.