

## Glory Days at the Mission School...

With football season upon us, and with it the ultimate testing of NCAA rules intended to discourage the use of ethnically-offensive team names and mascots, I am taken back in memory to my own days of glory on the field as a high school athlete.

I don't remember what our team name was in my early years at Holy Rosary Mission, the Catholic boarding school I attended on the Pine Ridge Reservation. I don't recall that we even had one. At tournaments we were usually introduced by announcers simply as "Indians." We weren't offended, only chagrined that all other tribal schools in the tournament carried the same name.

Later on a school wide contest was held and the "Charging Crusaders" was selected in a school wide contest. This nickname, of course, delighted our Jesuit faculty at the school.

Under legendary Lakota coach, Bob Clifford, our basketball team was known throughout the state for its winning record. But few people remember our early days in football back in the late 1940s. Perhaps it's just as well; at a recent reunion, one of our alumni described our football team as the "Mission Impossibles."

We had a six-man football program, but we were only able to muster a first string and three subs. But having only nine players was okay because we didn't have enough equipment to outfit a full second string anyway. It was, however, a problem in scrimmaging. We usually had to drag a few onlookers onto the field to fill in.

Our original uniforms were straight out of the Jim Thorpe era -- mothball smelly, lightly padded, and outright dangerous to play in. Our helmets were the old leather ones, and we were ridiculed by the BIA boarding school jocks that we were the only team around who could fold up our helmets after the game and keep them in our back pockets.

But one of the priests at the school appealed to a Jesuit university for its castoffs, since the college had discontinued its football program some years before. The colors weren't our school colors, but they were better than our old ones.

We couldn't use most of the old college uniforms because they were much too big for our scrawny Lakota boys. When we'd tuck the jersey in only the top of the numbers could be read. Number 88, for example, looked like double zeros. Number 11 was the only one the referees could make out with certainty, which is probably why the unfortunate player who got the number always had the most penalties.

While our old helmets were more like aviator caps of the Red Baron era, our new old helmets were molded leather, with crossed reinforcing strips over the top. They were very heavy and one running back would sometimes throw his helmet over to the sideline just before the ball was snapped because it bounced down over his eyes when he ran. This was not deemed illegal in our outdated rule books then, only dumb.

Most schools that we played were in small off-reservation border towns, and the gridiron was usually marked off in lime in somebody's cow pasture. Not a few slam-dunk touchdowns were foiled by fresh cow patties. Sand burrs were another problem; they would stick to the scruffy ball and were the bane of quarterbacks. But the cow patties and sand burrs gave great incentive for players to avoid getting tackled, which made for some powerful running backs.

In our Lakota language we found a strategic advantage: When our quarterback would forget the signal numbers, for example, he would just shout out the play patterns in Lakota instead. Opposing coaches would complain, but no one could find anything in the rule books that prohibited calling signals in Lakota. But the mixed bloods on our team were often confused by the signals, which often offset the advantage of our code-talker strategy.

Many of our cheers were in Lakota as well, like this one:

Timpsilala, timpsilala sha sha sha  
Shred 'em up, shred 'em up rah rah rah  
Tapalala, tapalala icupo  
Rosary, Rosary iya po.

Translated, the cheer is about carrots (timpsila sha), and although it didn't make much sense, we hoped that the strange incantation would have the same chilling effect on the opposition as did the Lakota battle cry "Hoka Hey!" which were the last words that rang in the ears of many bluecoats at Little Big Horn.

Although the Lakota advantage didn't help much overall, people in the border towns around the reservation still complained that it was unfair, unsportsmanlike, and perhaps even un-American.

We didn't win many games – actually I can recall only one victory in our first season. But we always had a rollicking good time, and at game's end we would sing out our school victory march as we cleaned manure out of our cleats and picked sand burrs off each others' uniforms.

Some of our younger generation up at Pine Ridge will undoubtedly say that this is just another one of those "I-walked-to-school-ten miles-through-blizzards" kind of stories. But it's all true. Just ask any old survivor of those glory days at Holy Rosary Indian Mission.

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