

Little Hawk of the Eastern Wind:

A Tale of an Indian Runner

Honors Project (HONRS 499)

by

Lori Shepperd

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Marvin Gray

  

---

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 5, 1995

May 6, 1995 Graduate

Splo  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200  
200

## ABSTRACT

As the culmination of my experience in the Honors College, my senior honors project proved to be an outstanding opportunity. I was able to explore an area in which I have always had great interest, that of the Native American culture, and relate it to my major, exercise science, by concentrating on the tradition of running in the Native American Indian culture. I thoroughly enjoyed my research on this subject and it allowed me to broaden my scope of knowledge.

## FOREWORD

Native American Indian culture has always been of great interest to me. I am intrigued by their traditions, customs, and way of life that revolves around nature and the environment. As an exercise science major, I chose to focus on an aspect of the Indian culture related to sport or exercise. The tradition of running in the Indian culture has a rich history and stood out as a promising research topic.

For my senior internship, I traveled to Albuquerque, New Mexico. This opportunity was a wonderful experience and, being in the “heart” of Indian reservation land, provided a wealth of information for the paper. The state of New Mexico provides a scenic backdrop for Indian running, graced with vast desert land and majestic mountains. In Albuquerque, the Sandia mountain range is situated as the eastern border of the city. The trail that traverses the entire height of the mountain is called La Luz Trail. A popular site for hiking and mountain get-aways, La Luz also serves as a training site for many Indian runners.

The tradition of running is still very strong in the Indian culture. Men and women, young and old, carry on the cultural heritage through generations of runners, running on high school teams, in marathons, or just for recreation. One such runner,

a high school junior from Gallup, New Mexico, holds many records and is currently ranked among the top five cross-country runners in the nation.

Inspired by both my personal experiences in Albuquerque and by the story of the Gallup high-school runner, I chose to prepare my project in the form of a short story. Because the Indian tradition of running is a very mystical and spiritual experience, it would be difficult to express the powerful feelings and events in traditional thesis form. This story, therefore, allows the reader the chance to actually experience the Indian spirit and connection with nature. Written as a fictional tale, it incorporates several legends and myths that have been passed down among the Native American tribes. These legends and tales will be quoted in the story, as they are very close translations from the referenced material. I believe that footnoting these tales distracts from the overall impression of the story, and I chose accordingly to credit the bibliographical sources from which they were drawn. Though these sources will not be individually cited, an overall bibliography will include all of the sources.

The setting of the story is in Albuquerque, with the mountain being Sandia and the characteristics of the main character being drawn from the Gallup runner and other Indian runners I was fortunate enough to speak with in New Mexico. The main character is a member of the Navajo tribe, as is the runner from Gallup. Having hiked the La Luz trail, I was able to incorporate many of my own images and reflections from the mountain. The time period is the present, and many internal conflicts involving the

modern changes that tribal members face have been incorporated into the storyline.

A video accompanies my creative story. Produced with a documentary approach, it provides a broad overview of the topic. The video is intended as a support mechanism for the paper. It includes interviews with Indian runners and history about the Indian culture and the integration of running into Native American life. Having never worked on video production before, I chose to attempt this part of my project as a new challenge.

I leave to the reader the privilege of experiencing the full realm of Indian running. It is a rich and exciting part of the Native American culture, and I have thoroughly enjoyed my research on this subject.

## Little Hawk of the Eastern Wind:

### A Tale of an Indian Runner

The early morning air drifted through the open window, floating across the room like a beckoning. The glow of the dawn hinted that the sun would soon rise, casting a red shadow over the land. Hawk rose silently from his slumber, feeling his lungs stretch as he inhaled the morning air. He quickly dressed, preparing for his daily run. First, he slipped into his running shorts, a favorite pair he had owned since high school. Then, he added the intricately beaded traditional skirt his mother had made for him. Hawk never ran without the skirt--it always seemed to bring him good fortune. Last, he pulled on his trusty running shoes. They had carried him across many miles, and he felt sure they would travel many more. As he walked out of the house, he gently lifted the small leather pouch from its hanger by the door. The pouch had been passed down through Hawk's family, and showed wear from many years of use. From his great-great grandfather, Swift Elk, to his great-grandfather, Coyote of the Woods, to his grandfather, Fox Running, to his father, Soaring Eagle, and finally, to him, Little Hawk of the Eastern Wind, it had become a necessary part of the running outfit. This pouch was the most prized of all Hawk's possessions. It held inside the tradition of his family, the tradition of his tribal culture, the tradition of running. Hawk often

wondered, if the pouch could talk, what great tales and mystical stories it would tell. And he wore it at his side on every run he made.

Hawk took another deep breath in the crisp morning air. He began to stretch and prepare for his dawn run. Like always, he would run east toward the mountain. An ancient Navajo belief inspired him to run in the early morning. His people believed that waking before dawn and running toward the sun as it ascended in the east would bring strength and good fortune. The spirits would bestow those qualities upon the runner and bless him throughout the run. Hawk remembered how, as a young boy, he would be awakened by his father, and how the two of them would run in the Navajo tradition toward the rising sun. Grandfather had said the Talking God, the “grandfather of the Gods,” would come around in the morning, knock on the door, and say, “Get up, my grandchildren, it’s time to run, run for health and wealth.”

Traveling on rainbows and sunbeams from his home in the corn pollen, there was something of the Zen master about the Talking God. He would communicate only by gestures. He was known to encourage those he guided toward self-fulfillment and the Navajo ideals of enterprise, courage, and quick mind. Running helped to root those virtues and direct one towards an industrious life. This was a ritual Hawk had continued, even after his father’s death. And perhaps now, it meant more to him than ever before.

Although many in his tribe had distanced themselves from tradition, Hawk still seemed to be drawn to the powerful and cultural and spiritual beliefs of his people. He admired the courage of his ancestors and was often awe-struck by tales of their spiritual experiences. Hawk was an Indian of the “old way” in his heart, but the drudge of every-day life seemed to force him to conform to the white-man’s world. When he ran, he could escape that world, and it was then that he felt closest to his heritage and most in touch with his spirit.

The sun had just begun to peek over the edge of the horizon when Little Hawk of the Eastern Wind jogged away from the reservation. “Ooooooo-waaaaay-witch-awatcha.” Hawk bellowed out the ritual yell, just as his grandfather had taught him. He would do this two more times during the run, and once more at the culmination, when he stopped at the top of the mountain. The breeze blew gently through his silken black hair, and the sound of his footsteps blended melodiously with the chirping of the birds. His calm stature and serious countenance gave no indication of the invigorating excitement that he was experiencing. He always felt it when he ran, from the time he was just a small boy. The emotions were just too great for words, the closeness to the elements, the oneness with the animals, the merging with the winds. As Hawk watched a rabbit dart across in front of him, his grandfather’s words echoed in his mind: “My boy, the gods and the animals ran long before Indian men and women ever did.

Thereafter the gods told our people to do it, and the animals showed us how.”

To Hawk’s grandfather, and to the Navajo people, running meant joining in the motion which is at the heart of life itself. The Navajo people believed everything was in a “ceaseless motion;” they recognized a positive identification between running, motion, and the life force. As Hawk approached the trail that would lead him up the mountain on his journey to an elevation of over 10,000 feet, he felt his legs become lighter. The drumming rhythm of his feet became a steady noise in his head, beating over and over. The musical jingling of the beaded skirt created a sweet song in his mind. He began to blend into his surroundings, to feel as if he were the breeze itself.

He swiftly moved along the narrow mountain path, feeling lighter with each step. His feet melted into the land, and his arms felt as if they were the wings of a great bird. He began to be hypnotized by the repetitious beat of his graceful footsteps. He ran with the wind, and he allowed it to carry him. His mind began to drift as he remembered tales that his grandfather had told him...tales of the great courier runners...tales of great races...tales of his people....

The stories of Indian running dated back, for some, to the beginning of time. Mythical races decisively separated men from animals. In the time when men could converse with animals, a great race was run from Devil’s Tower, North Dakota to Wyoming’s Grand Tetons. In the relays, the hawk pulled away in the last lap, landing

on the highest peak. The buffalo remained at the bottom, and the split-hoofed creatures withdrew without a word. It was from this great tale that Little Hawk had earned his name, the swiftest of them all.

Some stories of the Genesis even suggested that the great universe itself was formed from such races. Swift Elk, Hawk's great-great grandfather, believed that dust kicked up during the race between Coyote and Wildcat had created the Milky Way. As Hawk crossed the little rock bridge over the mountain stream, he recalled that the great river into which the stream flowed was formed also from a runner. As he moved inland, the river had evolved in his wake.

Ancient Navajo legends also told of the creation of the four seasons and cardinal directions. These were said to be created by four primordial runs. As the small leather pouch beat rhythmically against his thigh, Hawk was reminded of how the tradition of running helped to hold his culture intact. And, thinking of the ancient legends, he realized the important link running could provide between worlds, a way of communicating with timeless spirits and powers.

Communicating not only with nature, the ancient runners from Hawk's tribe needed to communicate with each other as well. The great runners, he had heard, would run long distances in very short periods of time. They were held in the highest regard, respected as communicators of culture--safekeepers of accurate information.

— Their status was high, as they helped keep their worlds intact and in touch. They were sworn to celibacy, for sexual activity would despoil and weaken them. Completely dedicated to their jobs as messengers, they would run with willingness, endurance, and tranquil braveness, like the hummingbird. They would take in only pure, good foods, eating turtle dove, quail, sweet milk, and Indian cornbread. They were to be always clean, well-groomed and well-shaped, for they were running on a mission--sometimes even an errand for the gods.

— Hawk listened to the sounds of the silent mountain air. The wind carried the beautiful birds soaring gracefully, but ever so swiftly, in the clouds above him. They called to him and encouraged him to continue his steps. He ran with a purpose, a sort of dedication that even he did not always understand. Perhaps his ancestors had also felt the same sense of loyalty to the morning ritual, as if they were following a calling that had been sent down to them on the wings of the great hawks.

— The great birds, he supposed, had even been an inspiration to his great-grandfather, Coyote of the Woods. Coyote was a quiet, kind man, smiling gently and speaking little. He performed as the others did when running in company, but when he was alone, he used the “old way.” One morning, Coyote left the Navajo village, destined for the mouth of the Gila River, a location 75 miles away. He didn’t want anyone else along, and the others respected his wishes. But when Coyote was out of

sight, the others began tracking him. His stride began to change, and the footprints in the nearby dunes became farther and farther apart, appearing as if he were taking giant steps, his feet touching the ground at long, irregular intervals. When the followers arrived at the village of his destination, they learned that he had reached the mouth of the river at sunrise of the same day he had left them in their home village. No one had witnessed this “teleportation” technique in action. It was not done with the aid of a “spirit helper.” Some say it was “ancient knowledge,” the knowledge that led Coyote to be one of the greatest Indian runners in all the history of the great Navajo tribe. The knowledge, Hawk felt, had been passed down to him in his blood, flowing stronger than ever like a river of pride throughout his body.

Hawk was, indeed, a very proud man. He had learned much about his heritage, the “old ways,” and the traditions of the past. Sometimes, he even wished he had lived in his great-great grandfather’s world--a world that now seemed buried in ancient history. So many things had changed, and it was increasingly easier to allow the ways of the modern world to break one’s spirit. Several members of Hawk’s tribe had converted to the “new ways,” leaving tradition far behind and giving little attention to tribal customs. Hawk, too, was influenced by the fast-paced world, but he had managed to keep his Indian spirit alive. He had always been intrigued by his ancestors’ powerful connection to nature and the great spirits, and somewhere in his heart, he

retained faith in those “ways of the past.”

The gurgling of the stream was a peaceful and familiar background song in the mountain. As the morning sun began to make itself known, burning away the clouds, Hawk skillfully circled around a jutting rock in the side of the cliff, respectful of its grandeur. He knew the path so well that he maneuvered without even looking at the rock. The hot, dry air smelled fresh as he breathed in deeply. The majestic mountain surrounded him, and he began to feel as much a part of it as the desert bushes that grew from its soil.

“Be racing. With joyful words, be racing. The abdomen, the back. Hawk, be racing.” Grandfather’s words drove Hawk forward as he continued up the great mountain, his breaths now steady and deep, and his heart pounding like the beat of the ceremonial drum. Grandfather had always raced, and was the “best of the best” in his day. Hawk recalled a story that grandfather’s brother, Lone Pine, had told: “Fox set out about three in the morning, ...alternating between sprinting and jogging. Some place between Navajo land and the western desert, he saw the sun hit the distant peaks. He piled up rocks there to remember how far he’d come. About forty miles from Gallup, at the springs near Weaver Creek, he rested again, dipping his piki bread into some water and eating, but not too much.

“It must have been about noon when he got to Gallup and went right to the

Jayhawk Valley Trading Post, where he was to deliver his message. The people there just sort of shook their heads. I guess he handed them the message and they wired it to the Bureau of Indian Affairs people in Washington. He stayed only a half-hour. They rubbed him down and tied food packs around his waist. But the packs were too heavy, so he let them fall off, keeping only his water flask.

“On the way back, he kept changing his gait. As he was coming from the red rocks, his legs began to tighten. Five or six miles from Grants he walked some. Then he ran. When he came within a mile of the village, he was so tired he could only walk. He got in around ten or eleven that night. It was the longest run he ever made, but perhaps the most important. He felt it for days afterward. The tribe members figured he’d gone 186 miles in less than twenty-four hours. He earned a feather in his headdress, and, most importantly, respect from all the members of the Navajo nation. From that day forward, he was looked upon as the greatest runner of his time.”

Fox Running had truly been the greatest runner of his time. He was a strong man, filled with wisdom and truth. “Racing is as much an exercise of consciousness as of speed,” he would tell Hawk. His tales taught Hawk to race with confidence, but to be fair and honest. “Once,” Fox had said, “the proud hummingbird was challenged to a race by the crane. Overly confident, the hummingbird soared ahead in the daylight, but stopped to rest at night. crane continued to flap patiently along. On the final

evening, to avoid waking hummingbird, crane headed for higher altitudes, reached the ocean, and won the right to inhabit the marshlands forever. You must race with cleverness, my swift grandson. And you must remember to seek spiritual assistance, and that is what gives you strength and good fortune.”

Fox knew all about running, and all about spiritual assistance. On one occasion, he had told of a young boy who would become the last ceremonial runner. In the thirteenth day of a fast, a hummingbird spoke to him. “Today, I bless you so. You will be very fast. You will call yourself, ‘ceremonial runner man.’ They will send you on errands no matter how far off. So I give you the qualities of speed and braveness. You will be exactly as I am.”

With this “holy gift” of speed came the power of invisibility. The hummingbird’s code was strict: To live morally in the future. The boy must not jest idly with people on his mission, nor use bad words, nor steal, nor mock. He was to eat only good things, and be always clean. For durability and power, he must exchange his regular deerskin moccasins for footwear of buffalo hide. A strip of hide tied around his waist would remind him of the messages he was to deliver.

He should not wear red, nor collect firewood from riverbanks where hummingbirds might be nesting. In gratitude for “this mystic power,” he must burn tobacco. He must carve a special runner’s bowl and spoon to use his entire life, tan a

bedroll from a spotted deer's skin, and sleep on the south side of his host's teepee. On runs he should carry the dried buffalo heart for strength.

On the fourth day of instructions, two hummingbirds had the boy strip down. When he was standing with the river up to his neck, they circled above his head until the earth "fell fast and whirled." The birds blew into his mouth four times, so strongly that he could not speak, as if to permanently expand his lungs for the work ahead. They said to him, "Perhaps this day you are the last ceremonial runner," and then they flew off.

At home, the boy took a sweat bath, picked up a spotted deer hide, and soon amazed everyone by his effortless running at top speed. From village to village he delivered council declarations in record time. He burned tobacco to the forces of nature and remained clean and pure. When he was an old man and close to death, the last runner warned: "Later on there will be many people who will ruin you. They won't be Indians and will think nothing of your rules. Later on you will have no one who will go about telling anything that happened to you. You will have a hard time. Even whenever you die you will not know that of each other if no one goes about reporting it, when you lose the ceremonial runners." Those ceremonial runners, Hawk thought, had been lost in their functional capacity in the tribes. But their tradition lived on, and Hawk felt connected with the last ceremonial runner through the spirits that

guided him.

He had often wondered if the “last ceremonial runner” was his grandfather, Fox Running. Hawk had noticed a reminiscent gaze in Fox’s eyes as he told the story, as if he had been there himself. But about such spiritual experiences one should not speak, for it may offend the gods. Whether the event had taken place just as Fox had told it or not Hawk was not sure. But what he was sure of was that Fox had been close to the spirits and had more than likely had such an encounter.

Hawk, too, had often wanted to have such an experience. He could only imagine the exhilaration Fox must have felt as he ran. He had possessed that special quality, the tie that seemed to connect him with the Gods. Fox had been a great runner with a great spirit, and Hawk knew that he too shared the same love for the run as his grandfather.

“Oooooooooo-waaaaaaaay-witch-awatcha. Oooooooooo-waaaaaaaay-oom-a-pah.” The spiritual chant spontaneously rolled from Hawk’s tongue. The powerful echo of his voice filled the canyon and blended with the sound of the waterfall. Hawk felt his spirit lifting, transforming him into the great bird of the blue sky. His mind was completely opened, and his lungs were filled with the cleansing mountain air. Each stride carried him closer to the heavens, lifting him like a hawk. His body soared along the narrow path, oblivious to all but nature alone. He was one with his surroundings,

vigorously alive and driven.

Hawk traversed the steep edge of the cliff, feeling as if he could step off and fly straight up to join the winged creatures. The shade of the overshadowing trees now cooled his moist, brown skin, and the misty air of the wooded trail provided a shield from the hot sun. Below, the city continued to fade into the distance, becoming smaller and less important. The hustle and bustle of the busy metropolis was only a memory now, and the sounds of the quiet mountain encompassed him. Above the layer of trees, the blue sky was only an arm's reach away, an extension of the mountain's peak.

The power of the run consumed him. He was united with his world; he was one with nature. At that brief moment in time, his destiny had been fulfilled. The magnificence of the mountain provided the hallowed backdrop for such a divine experience. Running this narrow path was an accomplishment in itself, and the privilege of closeness with nature that it provided made it an exceptional environment. Hawk had always been in awe of the beautiful mountain. As he ran up the trail, he felt as if he were traveling to another land, a world away from reality. The peaceful breeze greeted him, and the rolling rocks made him feel safe and protected. Many runners, Hawk knew, had trained for great races on that very path, and the future held plenty of new feet that would pass along the mountainside.

Nature was the omnipotent force of life. In the tribes, Hawk remembered, many

ceremonies were practiced to express respect for and cooperation with the forces of nature. His people prayed for rain, asked for good crops, and made sacrifices to the gods in exchange for strength during war. Hawk's mind drifted back to the ritual he recalled from his days as a young boy in the tribe. The words of the Navajo Chief had remained very clear....

“When the Sand Chief, the chief of the land, takes the prayer feathers, to pray on them and leave them in the fields, he goes barefooted and without covering on his limbs or body. The Cloud Chiefs may then see that he wants rain. He runs swiftly that the clouds may come swiftly, that his prayers be quickly answered. He loosens his hair, and lets it hang over his shoulders, for thus the Cloud Chiefs carry the rain clouds. He makes a far circuit on the first day, because the Cloud Chiefs live far away. He goes to the northwest, southwest, northeast, and southeast, to call the attention of all the Cloud Chiefs.... On each succeeding day, he travels in a shorter radius. It is thus we want the rain clouds to come, nearer and nearer, until on the concluding day of the ceremony they shall have come overhead and poured down the heavy rain upon ourselves, our houses, and all the surrounding lands, and we may see the arroyo full of running water and listen to its sweet sound.”

Hawk had never forgotten that day. Late in the afternoon, the rains had fallen like a blanket from the skies, coming from every direction. It had been the grandest

downpour he had ever seen. From that day on, he had believed in the magic of the rituals, and especially in the mystical powers of the ceremonial runners.

Hawk glanced to his right and watched a deer bound gently down the mountainside. This great mound of rock and earth was a home to many animals. Today, as always, Hawk, too, felt as if he were in his own home. The familiarity of the fresh air and silent power comforted him. And his never-failing respect for the mountain united him with his environment.

“Oooo-way-aawwwaa-waaaaay-ohh-waaaay-awana-ohhh-way-oh...” The words felt good in Hawk’s throat, ringing out across the trees and filling the sky. “Oooo-way-awano-way, awano-way-ohoh-waaaay...” The spirit inside him burst from his soul through his chant, and he was overcome by the power of his song. Chills ran down his spine as he sprinted proudly up the rocky trail. His spirit engulfed him and eased his stride--lifting him upward toward the heavens. The miniature village below was just a shadow now, a toyland with tiny cars and little buildings. He flew up the mountainside, oblivious to the unimportant scene a mile below. His arms became like the wings of a bird, helping his legs to swing smoothly past each other.

He pictured the runners of old in his head, gliding across the open desert on a mission. He imagined their muscular stature, their weathered faces, marked by high cheekbones and eyes of determination. He saw the strength in their legs, and felt the

power of their explosive strides in his own. Small beads of perspiration fell from his prominent forehead, dropping to the ground in an effortless shower. His eyes remained steady, confident and driven, focused only on the path ahead.

With an eruption of emotion, he crossed the final rock cluster and turned to the final leg of the path, the peak of the mountain in clear view. A great wind swept against his back, twirling the thick black locks on his head. He looked toward the sky, and saw there in the clouds the image of a great hawk, the clouds flapping in the wind as if they were the bird's wings. The other clouds parted, and the bright rays of the sun reflected above, outlining the hawk's shape with a golden glow. Hawk ran. He leaped toward the top of the mountain in his peak moment--the culmination of the run. He heard only the wisping of the brisk wind. He felt only the pounding of his heart. He saw only the picture of the great Indian runners in his mind, and the vision of the hawk in the turquoise sky. He stretched his arms up to the clouds, and cried out with an intense display of power. He reached the top of the great mountain, his legs burning with the exertion of the run. There, he fell to his knees, completely overcome with the experience.

At that moment, Hawk's world came together. He became his name, he was a great bird, the king of the sky. He believed in his people, his faith was renewed. He reached down with his hands, keeping his eyes lifted toward the heavens. He opened

the small leather pouch and took from it a weathered piece of rock. The stone felt smooth in his palm and cool from the protection of the leather. Hawk's heart pounded loudly as he continued to gaze up toward the heavens. He felt the rush of excitement sweep through his entire body, the wind still whipping through his hair from behind. Hawk raised the stone up in front of his face and lifted it to his eyes. He looked down, and read the crudely carved inscription:

*The mountain, I become part of it...  
The herbs, the fir tree,  
I become part of it.  
The morning mists,  
The clouds, the gathering waters,  
I become part of it.  
The sun that sweeps across the earth,  
I become part of it.  
The wilderness, the dew drops, the pollen...  
I become part of it.*

As Hawk finished reading the poem, he looked to his side. There, sitting on a large rock within his reach, was a beautiful hawk. The magnificent bird spread its wings in an enormous display of strength. The powerful breeze ruffled the hawk's feathers and swept through Little Hawk's hair. At that moment, Hawk felt as one with the great bird--on this day, Little Hawk of the Eastern Wind had become the hawk that now shared the mountain top with him.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Debo, Angie, A History of the Indians of the United States, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1970.
- Gridley, Marion Eleanor, Indians of Today, I.C.F.P., 1971.
- Harrod, Howard. L., Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, c1987.
- Hirschfelder, Arlene B., The Native American Almanac: A Portrait of Native America Today, New York, Prentice Hall General Reference, 1993.
- Kenner, Charles, A History of New Mexican-Plains Indian Relations, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1969.
- Nabokov, Peter, Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition, Santa Fe, Ancient City Press, 1981.
- Oxendine, Joseph B., American Indian Sports Heritage, Champaign, IL., Human Kinetics Publishers, c1988.
- Running, Corinne, When Coyote Walked the Earth: Indian Tales of the Pacific Northwest, New York, H. Holt, 1949.
- Sturtevant, William C., ed., Handbook of North American Indians, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1984.