

The State Champs from the Beginning of the World

by J.D. Kleinke

The girls from way out on the Makah reservation who won the 2023 Washington state 1B high school basketball championship may be, on average, half a foot shorter and two years younger than every team they beat on the way.

But first year Head Coach Cherish Moss—the twenty-nine-year-old with the thousand-yard stare who came back to Neah Bay to coach the team that she, her mother, and older sisters played on, the one her sisters and cousins play on now—has a matter-of-fact explanation that might sound like the usual gauzy coachspeak. “We believe in dreams,” she explains, with the unblinking, unflinching seriousness of the best coaches anywhere.

By “we” she does not mean just her two sisters or three cousins or the other six Lady Reds, as the sister team to the Neah Bay Red Devils are called. She is talking about their tribe, the Makah, the original inhabitants and once dominant maritime civilization at the extreme northwestern corner of Washington state. She is also talking about the 1,519 descendants and relatives of the tribe who still reside in or near Neah Bay, the fishing hamlet in the middle of the reservation that looks as if it had drifted down from Alaska and attached itself to the northwesternmost fingertip of the US mainland.

“Dreams carry messages, communicate, give us direction,” she says, echoing what many native religions around the US and Canada have always believed.

Revenge

Standing on a vast, deserted beach next to the Pacific Ocean just outside Neah Bay, in between fits of driving rain, wind, hail, and then sun, rainbow, and more driving rain, it is easy to slip into your own dream state. Alone among the sea stacks jutting from the ocean, massive tangles of driftwood, pounding of surf, and forested mountains to the north, south, and at your back, you can well imagine you are standing at what the Makah,

in their origin story, have always called the “beginning of the world.” You might even start to believe that a scrappy bunch of undersized girls—including ninth-graders and one eight-grader—could take on every high school their size in the state and win the state championship. With a brand-new head coach.

“My brother saw it in a dream,” Coach Moss continues. We are sitting in Neah Bay’s only sit-down restaurant, the Warmhouse, named for the traditional smokehouses where the Makah used to turn whales, seals, and fish into the bulk of their food supply. “The championship, all of it, in a dream. It was ten years ago, when he was playing. He saw me and the girls, with our own trophy.”

Making that dream come true at the ragged edge of the continent is another matter. Most of the teams on their road to the Washington state championship live along the urban corridor running north and south from Seattle—a four-hour drive east of Neah Bay—or even further east, in farm towns out on the high desert. Four hours...if the ferry crossing Puget Sound is on time. And if the narrow, serpentine two-lane road hugging the cliffs over the water has not been washed out that week by the 100-120 inches of rain and snow that fall on Neah Bay every year. And if the rez isn’t on lockdown, as it was for much of Covid—to protect their Elders from unvaccinated tourists—which wiped out a chunk of their 2021-2022 season.

But geographic obstacles can be managed, and schoolwork can be done from hotel rooms. The Lady Reds proved that in the 2021-22 season: despite a month-long shutdown in the heart of the season—thanks to Covid’s omicron surge, the road going out (again), and other factors beyond their control—they went all the way to the state’s championship game. And they did it with a roster of only eight girls, one of them injured and three of them eighth-graders.

Still, what do they remember most from that frustrating ordeal of a season?

They lost. By four points. In a championship against a full roster of girls from the Mount Vernon Christian School in Spokane Arena, an eight-hour school bus ride east of Neah Bay. (Or nine or ten hours, depending on the ferry.)

“Last year was hard,” Moss says, “coming so close.”

Last year, she was back on the rez from turns as a student-athlete at Haskell College and Evergreen State College, and had just signed on as an assistant to her old

team. With barely 100 kids in the high school, the Lady Reds struggled to get even those eight girls suited up to play.

It was especially hard to forget that they lost that game, thanks to fans from MVC who chanted “Se-cond place! Se-cond place!” as the Lady Reds filed out of the gym after the game in tears.

Coach Moss recalls their departure, her voice clouded with emotion. “I understand victory celebrations. But taunting thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls who just played their hearts out?”

The people from Neah Bay, unwilling to hide their “otherness” when in unfriendly gyms—they can’t afford cheerleaders, so their fans sing a pulsing, traditional Makah chant during clutch moments in the game—are used to bad treatment from opposing teams. Like kids from reservations across the country, they have confronted all manner of nakedly racist gestures from opposing teams and their fans: the war whoops and tomahawk chops; the pantomime after a big score of shooting them with bows and arrows; the football team that ran out onto the field and removed their helmets as group to reveal they had all cut their hair into mohawks. Ugly, inhumane fan opposition is nothing new.

At games far from Neah Bay, multiple generations of Makah families have been the targets of harassment, verbal threats, slashed tires. Coach Moss does not want to give any particulars—the episodes were painful and the proud and self-reliant Makah are the last people in the world to cry victim—but she tells me her own vehicle was once singled out for vandalism outside the gym at Evergreen State, a liberal arts school outside Olympia renowned for its free form curriculum and progressive politics.

Was the especially cruel behavior after the Lady Reds’ loss last year to MVC more thinly veiled racism, or just high school kids acting like jackasses? Or does it have something to do with Neah Bay’s unique style of play? And not just the play of this particular girl’s basketball team, but the way the boys’ basketball team plays and, for that, matter, the Neah Bay boys’ football team. Subject to the same challenges—markedly smaller and younger, drawn from a high school with fewer than 100 students to field their rosters—the Neah Bay teams, no matter the sport or gender all compensate the same way: by attacking, relentlessly. Coach Moss’ girls run the floor the way the boys’ football team runs their defense: every other play is a blitz, and seemingly every other blitz forces

a turnover. It's almost comical to watch: a big, swaggering six-foot tall senior takes an inbound pass under her own basket, then turns just in time to see a squeaky little freshman materialize out of nowhere, tearing the ball from her hands. The big senior stands there befuddled, her face knotted up with an indignant "can she do that?" while the freshman squirts around her for the layup.

That's how Neah Bay teams win games against older, bigger teams: by swarming them from the opening buzzer, rattling them, knocking them so far off their game plan that they cannot recover. The results? Tough, physical, high scoring games... and surly opponents and mean-spirited opposing fans.

So ferocious a style of play is not unique to Neah Bay, and in fact has a name in high school basketball circles: "rez ball." It's akin to the risky strategy of "run 'n' gun" — full court sprints on every play either straight to the basket or the first open shooter—and while it has much of the same shock value on opposing teams, it is also more disciplined and more nuanced, at both ends of the floor. Neah Bay's girls can't outjump anybody for rebounds, so they swarm them under both baskets. It's meant to flummox and exhaust the other team, and it works. What they lack in size and age, they make up for with tenacity, ferocity, relentlessness. What they lose in rebounds for their height they make up for with forced turnovers up and down the floor.

That's how the Lady Reds won state this year. Coach Moss may claim that the casual cruelty of MVC's fans last year was one of several factors that inspired them to win the championship "for revenge." With close to a full roster and their youngest starter now in high school, the Lady Reds went undefeated this season—*after* losing their season opener in December against Sequim, a school of 800-plus kids in the much larger 2A division a two-hour drive back toward Seattle. That loss apparently inspired more revenge: they went back and beat Sequim in February.



Reservation Dogs

The bittersweet savor of “revenge” would explain why the returning hometown hero coach allowed herself, after the community-wide celebration last month, a few extra laps around Neah Bay with the state basketball trophy buckled into the passenger seat of her pickup. And it’s five quick blocks from the community gym to the high school.

Most of the rest of the Makah world is maritime, and Neah Bay looks like a perfect working prototype for an Alaskan fishing village: a grid only six blocks wide and three blocks deep off the main drag, a waterfront road open to a marina.

Out here under the relentlessness of that 120 inches of precipitation, fresh paint doesn’t stand a chance. Fading memories of color cling to tough little houses shouldering

into the wind and rain and surrendering, not so slowly, to mold, rust, and gravity. Neah Bay sits at the epicenter of the Makah's ancestral homeland, where the Makah have lived continuously for the last 4,000-plus years, despite efforts by American treaty negotiators in the 1850s to move them all out and concentrate them on a "consolidated" reservation with other tribes in the region. The bulk of the tribe is still wrestling a living much the same way they always did: from the sea.

The beginning of the world, as they have known this place for those four millennia, stretches forty miles out to sea, to fishing banks at the edge of the continental shelf. It still supports what looks like a healthy economy of small commercial fishing operations. Only on a second-pass around the town's edges does Neah Bay look like other reservations: ramshackle trailers and pre-fabs falling in on themselves; unpaved side streets pockmarked with water-filled potholes; front yards given over to rusted hulks of cars, trucks, and boats; the stooped shadow of a person dressed in red, black, and mud, wandering in a daze.

But also wandering the frumpy streets are the usual reservation dogs, and they look healthy and fed. The busy marina is spiked with the masts and antenna of a hundred fishing boats. Lots of new trucks cruise the waterfront, slower than the twenty mph speed limit, their drivers waving at each other, at strangers, at whomever is walking or biking by on the road, because it is almost certainly someone they know.

The most striking difference of all, which won't meet the eye on a drive through town: the Neah Bay High School manages the nearly impossible, a 100 percent graduation rate since 2011. Most reservations across the US struggle to get that number to fifty percent. The number is easy to keep track of: in a town of 1,100, there are never more than 100 kids in the high school at a time, and every teacher and nearly everyone in town knows exactly who they are and where they should be on a weekday afternoon.

The other reservation dogs are here too, in particular the perennial reach of alcoholism and drug addiction, despite the well-publicized, reservation-wide prohibition of alcohol, weed, and illegal drugs everywhere on the rez. Coach Moss is highly protective of her girls' privacy, and while she credits family stability and support for much of the team's success, she acknowledges that the stability was hard won by many who dealt with the same demons that haunt reservations around the country.

She is also quick to point out the advantages of family life on the rez: everybody is an aunt, uncle, or cousin; even the kids from the most desperate circumstances get raised by some relative, and assisted in high school graduation by everybody.

Sit among the Neah Bay fans at any game and you will see for yourself: the babies go from lap to lap, up and down the bleachers.

“We are Family”

Those extra laps around town for the gold basketball globe in Coach Moss’ truck was her way of extending the community-wide celebration at the other end of town from the high school.

The night before, nearly 600 people had packed into Neah Bay’s cavernous community gym—designed like the great Makah ceremonial longhouses, with red and black touches everywhere—to welcome the trophy, share a meal, and honor the Lady Reds with traditional singing, drumming, and prayers.

The celebration began with an exuberant, ritualized processional around the great perimeter of the space. First, the drummers and singers, a dozen men and women chanting traditional Makah songs—a steady, pulsing, insistent drumbeat, one-two, one-two, like a collective heartbeat over the joyful wail of a song in the muted tones of their ancient language. Behind them came the team in their new matching red and black hoodies: skinny, gawky, and looking as self-conscious as teenage girls everywhere, not so much bathing in the adulation as showing up for it, appeasing their extended families’ wishes to shower it on them on and the shiny gold trophy in their hands. Then, taking up the rear, dancers, older ladies in red and black, twirling and swaying and stomping to the beat.

When the girls took their seats in their honored place at the end of the gym, the musicians gathered off to the side, their circle swelling with more people, voices, and drums, and then nearly all six hundred people lined up to greet, hug, high five every one of them. By the end, there were thirty or forty singers from four generations gathered around the team.

Saying your team is “like family” sounds like more gauzy coachspeak, an emotionally loaded term meant to align headstrong players and galvanize team unity. But in Neah Bay, the team actually is family. Coach Moss is not *like* a big sister to the team; two of them are her sisters, and three others are her cousins. It’s also the same team she played on with her older sisters—and the same team her mother played on in the 1990s with her aunt.

But while this may go a long way to creating the team unity the “we are family” cliché is meant to inspire, it is still a sensitive subject in a very small town.

“Yes, us being family is an advantage,” Moss says, a little defensively. “But it’s also a disadvantage. I am very aware of how everything looks. I think it puts more pressure on my sisters to perform harder, so it doesn’t look like I’m playing favorites.”

Pressure indeed. Because until this year, no girls had lifted that trophy in the Neah Bay High School gym. Coach Moss’ brother Ryan had, with the Neah Bay boys team in 2016. Her brother Robert won a junior college basketball championship while playing for Peninsula College. (“PC” as everyone on the rez calls it, is the junior college nearest Neah Bay and only an hour and forty-five minutes to the east in Port Angeles, a once scruffy logging town situated at the gateway to Olympic National Park and trying to re-invent itself around a tourist economy.)

Coach Moss herself won the same title—playing along with another sister, Cierra—for the women’s team while at PC. “Maybe that’s why I had that dream,” she says. “I’d experienced it, saw what it took, knew what it felt like.”

Like so many kids who grew up on reservations, she went away to college—in her case not just Peninsula, but to Haskell, a predominantly native school in Kansas, and Evergreen State—and then came back home with what she had learned.

“How to win,” is how she summarizes those lessons.



She also gives credit for the team's success to her assistant coach, Tony McCaulley. Fifty-six, as head coach for the Neah Bay boys football team, he took them to four state championships. He was also part of his own high school's state championship basketball and football teams in the early 1980s in Clallam Bay, the first town east of Neah Bay. His day-job is out in the woods, working as a logger, and he has the missing fingers to prove it. And yet, for all the mansplaining and coachsplaining one might expect from a white lumberjack nearly thirty years her senior, he remains off to the side during time-outs, coaching girls one-on-one, while Moss calls the plays, disciplines players, engages with officials.

"He really does let me run the team," Moss says, no matter how hard I press the question. "I can always count on his experience when something comes up, something complicated, like with a family, maybe a sensitive situation. He's seen it all, gives me great advice, and always knows what to say."

That too, of course, could be the same "we are family" effect: Tony also happens to be her second-cousin. Yes, he's a white guy, but he grew up just off the rez in Clallam Bay and married onto it in 1989 and has lived here ever since. His wife, Lauri, Moss' second cousin, also pitches in and feeds the team. And their daughter, Gina, is the second assistant coach. We are family indeed.

Back home, besides coaching the now state champion Lady Reds, Moss teaches kindergarten in the Neah Bay Elementary School. She also, like the traditional artists, artisans, and musicians all around Neah Bay, is actively involved with the cultural revitalization of the Makah, much of which revolves around the sea.

"We're doing this for our ancestors," Moss tells me. "I learned this from my grandmother. She is a warrior. We did not want to let her down."

For Our Ancestors

"There is something about this team," Neah Bay High School's principal, Lucy Dafoe, said to me last fall, before I had seen them play a single game.

Easy enough to write that off as obvious school pride, but she too has been on the receiving end of Neah Bay's style of play: Dafoe played basketball against Coach Moss'

mother and aunts back when she was growing up in Joyce, a tiny logging town an hour east of Neah Bay.

“There is something about this team,” she says again, after I have come to know the team. When pressed for what she means, she does not elaborate, as if she may or may not have her own theory, but leaves me to figure it out for myself.

Maybe it *is* revenge, and not just against the occasional racist gesture or unsportsmanlike taunt from opposing teams and their fans. Maybe it has something to do with those 120 years of attempted erasure, the after-taste of which Neah Bay fans often get at someone else’s school when they break out into that traditional Makah song. Unlike those teams, Neah Bay cannot afford to uniform or travel with cheerleaders—if they could, they would sooner spend the money on a trainer, which they also do without—but they do have loyal fans who log hundreds of road miles and dozens of hotel rooms with them. And a clutch moments in the game, those fans will break out into their song, another melodic chant over that steady, insistent one-two, one-two drum beat.

It sounds beautiful, haunting, even a little chilling—until it is drowned out by the chant of the opposing team’s fans: “We can’t hear you! We can’t hear you!”

It may sound fanciful to some cynical modern ears, but might this be what Coach Moss means about her team “doing this for our ancestors?”

Maybe this is what Dafoe means by the “something” about this team that turned them and their new head coach into state champs. It’s something that transcends sport and elicits profound, collective emotions about survival, recovered identity, and lasting strength. Something about a convergence of history and culture and family and spirituality unique not just to the Makah, but to all natives who have survived the predations of colonizers, missionaries, and other agents of cultural genocide. The Makah just happened to be blessed with the maritime bounty at the beginning of the world, and ever since have been uniquely positioned to endure, survive, and thrive, if in their own hardscrabble way.

Among native communities, there is—as there should be—a frank, difficult, and long overdue discussion about the long tendrils of inherited, inter-generational trauma. But what about inherited, inter-generational toughness? Guns, germs and steel may have been the bulwarks of the colonizing civilization, the drivers of outcomes in a world shaped by imperialism, conquest, and colonization, and the guns and germs certainly affected

the Makah. Three-quarters of their population was wiped out by smallpox in the early 1850s, the Neah Bay waterfront once lined with the bodies of people dying faster than the “Indian Agent” could drag them off and bury them in mass graves.

The collective memory of this horror is why the rez closed down during Covid. The Makah all got vaccinated, and knew better than to trust the outside world to do the same. Like other reservations who shut their borders during the pandemic, the Makah did it for one reason: to protect their Elders. While people around the US indulged in their political tantrums about masks and vaccine “resistance,” native tribes knew better than to mess around with a pandemic. Why was their Indian Agent willing and able to throw all those bodies into mass graves? Because he had been vaccinated against smallpox, which was readily available by then, but he chose to withhold it from the Makah as away of checking their then considerable economic power in the region.

Even after the 1852 wave of smallpox had wiped out an estimated 1,500 of the 2,000 Makah then living in or around Neah Bay—along with its two most powerful leaders—the tribe survived. And it managed to recover enough to push the treaty-makers who showed up three years later back on their heels. Because what the Makah lacked in guns or steel, they had in the form of whaling canoes, fishing gear, and sophisticated trade networks for a hundred miles in every direction. They had economic and military control of a major maritime crossroads, where what would be called Puget Sound down in the US and the Strait of Georgia up into Canada ran out to the Pacific Ocean.

As a result, the Makah were the only tribe in the Pacific Northwest to force major changes in the boilerplate treaty crammed down the throats of the dozens of tribes to their east and south. They held on not just to their ancient homeland, but to the greater part of their geography—the sea—and they retained the right to continue whaling for food and trade, their defining cultural practice. They were not denuding the ocean of whales like the great colonial powers of the day; they whaled by hand and harpoon, from giant dugout canoes so far from shore they lost sight of the land. They stayed out there for days, hunted a whale, sewed up its mouth to keep it from sinking, and then towed it back to feed the village for the next month.

Those are ancestors Coach Moss is talking about. And maybe *that's* Principal Dafoe's "something about this team:" an inherited, inter-generational toughness that cannot help but befuddle opposing players trying to inbound a ball.

In Neah Bay, the Makah keep that inherited, inter-generational toughness alive through an active ocean-going canoe culture. In the 1990s, as part of their cultural restoration efforts, they were authorized by the International Whaling Commission—consistent with their 1855 treaty to hunt whales—to harvest five whales per year.

Five whales is a pittance next to the 1000-plus whales still taken every year around the world for purely commercial purposes. But guess which people of color is confronted directly, at sea and on the docks of their fishing village, by animal rights activists who clearly have no interest in their history, treaty rights, or culture? The Makah people and Neah Bay are right there at the far end of the continent, and they cannot afford the same corporate lobbyists and law firms to protect their rights, making them much easier targets than the government-sanctioned corporations of Japan, Russia, Denmark, and Norway.

Did the Makah back down? Of course not. In 1999, they went out and harpooned one whale, as they had for the previous 4,000 years or more, after undergoing the traditional preparations of fasting, sacred bathing, and praying to align with the spirit of the whale they would catch.

Today, the residents seem in a state of readiness for the next hunt. They build traditional canoes, and in annual cultural celebrations, race them on their home waterfront: little kids against each other; brother and sister teams; men and women in their 50s and 60s. Watching Makah of all ages with nothing more than a t-shirt, pair of shorts and paddle, racing in handmade canoes out to the maritime horizon may also explain that "something" about this team: they are the daughters of an ancient culture that values not just athletic prowess but absolute fearlessness.

The dominant narrative of native peoples across this continent is that they are victims. They are despondent, dependent living ghosts, embarrassing footnotes to an American history steeped in guns, germs, and steel, and written in the blood of quaint, pastoral people. Those who like to tell that story—to prove their sensitivity to racism or signal their progressive virtue—ought to watch the Neah Bay Lady Reds play basketball.

Next year, they will be the defending Washington 1B state champs.



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