

This story was written down in the 1670s by Friar Juan de Paiva, who was told the story by the Apalachee at Mission San Luis.

This transcription of the story has been shortened and slightly modified from its original translation.

The Origins of the Apalachee Ball Game

Listen, and I'll tell you a story. Long ago, when all the Apalachee were non-Christians, there were two chiefs who lived in neighboring villages. One chief was named Ochuna Nicoguada. This name represents the lightning bolt. The second chief was called Ytonanslac, a wise and elderly man associated with an Apalachee God. Ytonanslac, the second chief, had a granddaughter, Nicotajulo, whose name means "woman of the sun." Nicotajulo gave birth to a baby boy, who she hid in some bushes. There, the panther, the bear, and the blue jay found him. They brought the child to his grandfather, Chief Ytonanslac. Ytonanslac ordered the animals not to tell anyone else about the child.

Chief Ytonanslac raised the child in his house. When the child became 12, he was named Oclafi, which means "lord of water." When the child became 20, this name was taken away, and he was given a new name, Eslafiyupi.

As he grew to become an adult, Eslafiyupi was known for having a lot of courage, not only when shooting a bow and arrow but also while playing the game "chunky." Chunky is a game that Southeastern Indians have played since the beginning of time.

Because Eslafiyupi was well known for his courage, he was noticed by the first chief, Ochuna. Chief Ochuna thought Eslafiyupi might be the son of Chief Ytonanslac's granddaughter. This worried Ochuna, because the shamans had predicted that someday this boy was destined to defeat him. In order to learn whether Eslafiyupi was the boy destined to defeat him, Ochuna tried to see if he could defeat the boy first by presenting him with three dangerous challenges.

Eslafiyupi's grandfather, Chief Ytonanslac, knew of the shamans' predictions. He told his grandson that before he agreed to do the three challenges, he should tell his grandfather about them. So Eslafiyupi did tell his grandfather when Chief Ochuna gave him the first challenge.

And what was that first challenge? It was to get raw flint, the type of stone needed to make arrowheads. This flint was in a very deep sinkhole. When Eslafiyupi told his grandfather Ytonanslac about this challenge, the grandfather said "Son, this spring is very deep. You cannot get the flint stone from it without risking your life." Ytonanslac then gave Eslafiyupi special beads made of shell, and told Eslafiyupi to give the beads to a little bird that he would find diving at the sinkhole. He should then ask the bird to get the flint. Eslafiyupi did what his grandfather said, and the bird got the flint for him. Eslafiyupi then brought the flint to his challenger, Ochuna.

Chief Ochuna then gave Eslafiyupi two more dangerous tasks to do. For the second task, Eslafiyupi was asked to get cane from a cane thicket to make arrow shafts. But this cane thicket was full of venomous snakes! When Eslafiyupi told his grandfather about this task, he said "Son, what you should do is make hoops from grapevines and carry them with you. And when

the snake comes out of the cane thicket, throw the hoop where it is crawling. Then the snake will chase the hoop and you can hurry and cut the canes while it is gone.” Eslafiyupi did just that. He went, cut his canes, and brought them back.

For the third task, Ochuna asked Eslafiyupi to take some baby eagles from a certain nest high in the tall trees. Eslafiyupi was helped by his grandfather’s advice, and completed this challenge unhurt. When Eslafiyupi’s challenger, Chief Ochuna, found out he completed all three challenges, Ochuna decided that he could not defeat Eslafiyupi this way because he had special powers. Chief Ochuna then decided that they should play the first ball game. This was the beginning of the Apalachee ball game, when the traditions and rules of the game were established.

On the day of the game, the team of Chief Ytonanslac (the grandfather of our hero Eslafiyupi) entered the Plaza of Chief Ochuna’s village. When the visiting team was asked if they were ready to play, Chief Ytonanslac’s team said no, that they needed more players. Chief Ochuna told them to choose more players from the people who came with them to watch the ball game. One of the people they chose was Eslafiyupi. He looked like he was sick because he was wrapped in a blanket and leaning on a post when they picked him for the team. The game then began! When Ytonanslac’s team reached seven points, Eslafiyupi let out a yell that sounded like thunder! It was then that everyone realized that he was Nicogvadca, the lightning bolt that comes from the sun Nicotajulo.

Ever since that first game it was known that whichever team reached seven points would win because Nicogvadca, the lightning bolt, was on their side. With Nicogvadca on their side, the team with seven points was said to have won the ball game.

Eslafiyupi-Nicogvadca ruled as chief for many years and when he was nearing his end, he told the Apalachee that he would go to the sky as steam and come back as rain for their crops. He said to them “When you hear it thunder, it is a sign that I am coming.” From that moment on, whichever team scored seven points would later hear the thunder of Eslafiyupi-Nicogvadca coming to give them rain.

And now our story is done. Take it with you in your mind and heart, tell it to others, and learn from the lessons it can give.