

PESÄPALLO — FINNISH NATIONAL GAME

one of the two demonstration sports at the Helsinki Games.

Pesäpallo (Finnish baseball) has been selected as the national game for demonstration at the Helsinki Olympic Games.

In the large group of ball games, pesäpallo represents a strike game played by two teams (9+9 players). The present codified form of the Finnish ball game was only developed after World War I. Its forerunner was the generally popular « king-ball » which was characterized by the tossing serve (« fungo »); before it even more primitive games were played. Thus the roots of pesäpallo can be traced back to the same general origin as those of English cricket and American baseball. In fact it resembles the latter in many respects, but is livelier in action. Instead of a horizontal serve, as in cricket and baseball, a vertical serve is used in pesäpallo, the pitcher facing the batter across the home plate.

Hitting ball in Finland is primarily an active ball game for the masses. Everywhere, and especially in the country, including the remotest hamlets, strike-ball is played. It is not a big city spectator sport like football. The « peasant » character of pesäpallo is partially attributable to the fact that it can be practised even on uneven grounds; it also appeals to the hard-working farm population, which likes the light, limbering aspect of pesäpallo.

Pesäpallo is especially popular with youth, and is played in all schools and colleges. But it is also a game for men, widely played in various leagues. About 2000 teams play it during the season, which begins in May and ends in September. Club teams are organized on a national basis in various leagues, and some of teams even are based north of the Arctic Circle.

When Prof. Lauri Pihkala created pesäpallo, he designed the playing area to fit into a normal athletic field. Thus a triangular-shaped infield joins the square-shaped backfield, the backline of which determines the longest permissible flight of the ball (86 meters or c. 94 yards in a straight line to the center). This limitation was made to offset the relative easiness of a vertical

pitch. Peculiar looking zig-zagging of the baserunners is a direct result of the principle that the course of a runner should become more difficult by degrees.

A league player must be in good condition, versatile, possess a strong throwing arm, keen eye and speed for fly catching and base-running. Mental alertness is needed for quick decision. In essence, however, Finnish baseball compares with its American counterpart: strenuous enough to benefit everybody, but not too strenuous to harm anybody. Therefore it is suitable for all age groups, as long as the players are physically fit. Consequently pesäpallo is also well suited for and is a popular form of sport with girls and women.

The above is a brief sketch of the Finnish national game. No attempt has been made to spread it abroad, though foreign visitors have shown interest in it.

As the host for the 1952 Olympic Games, Finland is proud to demonstrate to her foreign guests a « home made » game which, physically speaking, comprises many fine features.
