

Pawnee Traditional Athletic Games

by

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The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago is the site of a replica of a 19th century Pawnee earth lodge. The replica moves visitors back in history to the 1850s when the Pawnee, hunters and farmers, lived in earth lodges along the Loup River in Nebraska. The earth lodge interior is furnished with traditional Pawnee beds, clothing, tools, weapons, and trade store items. Included among the tools permanently exhibited in the lodge are implements for some of their games while additional game implements of the Pawnee are exhibited outside of the lodge. Accounts of traditional athletic games of the Pawnee are included in four seasonal programs of Pawnee activities and ceremonies of the middle 19th century. The purpose of this investigation was to synthesize the available historical and anthropological information concerning the traditional athletic games of the native Americans known as the Pawnee who lived for hundreds of years in villages along the rivers of Nebraska in their earth lodge homes before they returned in the early 1870s to Oklahoma from whence they had emigrated so many years earlier.

In the Pawnee villages along the rivers of present-day Nebraska, the game of hoop and stick was a major leisure-time preoccupation of boys and men of all ages. Every village had one or two, or even more, well-worn gaming tracks for hoop and stick which were laid out in a specific manner. These grounds were called Wiharu, or place-where-things-are-performed. The basic equipment for the game consisted of a long spear and a hoop which was rolled down the long track and at which the spear was aimed as the contestants ran alongside. Boys and men of different age categories played distinct variations of hoop and stick; small boys, young men, mature men, and old men each had distinctive hoops and distinctive sticks which they used in their game variations. A number of stories in the oral tradition of the Pawnee told of the hoop and stick game, its variations, its origins, its use by cultural heroes, and its continuance in spirit-land.

Gambling was a main recreation for some Pawnees and an occasional one for others. Athletic games were occasions for gambling; hoop and stick grounds were referred to as gambling grounds by Pawnee. It was recognized that habitual gambling was a compulsion that should be avoided as a destructive trait and chiefs were heard to give advice on how to keep the gambling impulse under control. Implicit in Pawnee religious symbolism was an aspect of game playing where gambling was an extraneous feature. The rolling of the hoop along the long game grounds and aiming at it with the stick was an act of sympathetic magic both for the increase of the buffalo and the successful outcome of the buffalo hunt that was a semi-annual expedition taking the Pawnee away from their earth lodges for two-thirds of the year and out onto the prairies hundreds of miles to the southwest. In addition to hoop and stick, a number of additional athletic games were played by Pawnee boys and men. Archery, dart, and snowsnake games as well as shinny were included in Pawnee culture although their importance was minor. All of these games - hoop and stick, archery, darts, snowsnake, and shinny - were played within the confines of the village or at most between members of the same band. The four bands of Pawnee - Skidi, Chauee, Kitkahaki, and Pitahaueret - rarely contested in interband rivalry. Only one game, a rough kicking game, was sometimes held where age divisions of boys and men would engage in a kicking contest between bands. The only athletic game of Pawnee girls and women was doubleball. There was little time for recreation in the life of the Pawnee female; her life was one of constant

toil. Women were incessantly at work from early dawn until late at night: with raising, collecting, preparing, and preserving food; with manufacturing clothing as well as tools and utensils of the home; and with transporting the household on the semi-annual buffalo hunt.