

# Indigenous Games

Presented by Cole Wilson

Saskatchewan Physical Education Association

## A Sense of Time and Place

Every child must learn to survive in the time and place they will be living in. Although traditional Indigenous skills may no longer be necessary for survival, many are still extremely relevant and desired if our students are going to lead full, healthy lives.

As physical educators we are quick to point out the holistic value of our subject to our student's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. It is important to acknowledge that for thousands of years, indigenous people have had education systems that are holistic and recognize the importance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In First Nations culture, everything had a purpose, value, or skill. Life was rich in relationships, teamwork, art, music, dance, and gaming. Although the word "games" is probably not appropriate for practicing the skills necessary for survival, much education occurred through physical activity. Each activity had a purpose such as increasing endurance, improving hunting and observation skills, or learning social values.

Unfortunately the value of learning through games or play was almost wiped out by Western European beliefs that work and play are opposed and that "work" is more important than "play". Even as the latest research points to the value of free play in child development, we are in danger of repeating this mistake with our own children.

As we begin to acknowledge the effectiveness of traditional First Nations education, we should also look for opportunities to incorporate these methods into our teaching.

## Circle Teachings

Circle teachings, such as the Medicine Wheel, are used by many Indigenous Peoples in the Western Hemisphere. They are used to express the interrelationship of all living things. Historically, traditional knowledge systems provided an ideal environment for childhood development that supported the ultimate goal of becoming a positive, contributing member of the community. This included the understanding that human health, balance and happiness rests on the interrelationship of four foundations that cannot be separated: body, spirit, mind, and emotion. A growing body of evidence supports the validity of this philosophy in creating engaging learning environments for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The potential connections between traditional indigenous knowledge and contemporary curricula is particularly strong in Physical Education (Kalyon). In Physical Education we can utilize the circle to symbolize the holistic nature of being physically literate as we help our students develop themselves harmoniously in all four dimensions: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

In a traditional model, skills and knowledge are not "things" that can be owned. They are alive and growing and about becoming. The purpose of developing skills and knowledge is about developing a way of being so that you become the best person you can be. If we think of skills and knowledge in this way they become verbs as opposed to nouns. This idea of developing a way of being as opposed to collecting things to be owned is consistent with the goal of creating students who adopt a healthy active lifestyle as a way of being.

The **Circle of Courage** uses the medicine wheel as a visual representation of traditional indigenous knowledge about raising respectful, responsible children and how this knowledge can be used to help struggling youth. It was developed by Martin Brokenleg, a professor of Native American Studies, and Larry Brendtro, a professor in children's behavior disorders. By organizing around the human needs for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity the focus moves away from fixing a child, to the environment the child is learning in. We can use Circle of Courage to symbolize the opportunities that students will have to demonstrate their values as they participate in physical education.

## **The Goals of Physical Education in Saskatchewan:**

- Active Living – enjoy and engage in healthy levels of participation in movement activities to support lifelong active living.
- Skillful Movement- enhance quality of movement by understanding, developing, and transferring movement concepts, skills, tactics, and strategies.
- Relationships- balance self through safe and respectful personal, social, cultural, and environmental interactions.

## **Placing These Goals in a Traditional Indigenous Perspective**

**Physical:** First Nations admired persons of superior strength, stamina, or dexterity because they helped keep the entire community healthy and strong. It was in the best interests of all to make sure everyone was as skilled as possible. Long ago, Indigenous games were still played by adults in their forties and fifties.

I would argue that it is still in the best interest of our society to have everyone as healthy as possible. To that end we want to develop these physical characteristics in our children so that they become physically literate and have the knowledge and confidence to lead a physically active lifestyle as adults.

**Mental:** Success while hunting or during battle would depend on effective use of strategy and tactics. The ability to develop successful strategies and tactics, and recognize and solve problems quickly is still relevant to being successful in today's society.

Games of intuition and chance were played by all ages. Even the youngest learned observation, sensing, and intuitive skills to increase awareness of their surroundings. Safety of everyone often depended upon intuition or extraordinary visioning. With the onslaught of technology and the disconnection from our natural environment, many children and adults are losing their abilities of keen observation and natural intuition. Perhaps these skills are just as important in the world today.

**Spiritual:** Spirituality in this context does not pertain to religion. It is simply building and nurturing the positive relationships that help make a community strong. The social nature of physical education makes it ideal for exploring personal identity and self-awareness and the values and beliefs that determine how students will relate to others and their environment

The social values of traditional games reflect aspects of First Nations culture that I think are worthy of promoting in our students.

- Honor those that gave you the most challenge.
- Respect the rules of the competition.
- Respect your competitors.
- Have courage, intuition, persistence, and patience.
- Be humble even when winning.
- Help others be the best they can be
- Recognize how your environment contributes to your quality of life and respect it

We have to be careful not to assume our students understand these concepts, and make sure we give them opportunities to experience them and practice them.

**Emotional:** Every task students embark on will have emotions such as joy, frustration, anger, pride attached to them. Physical education is an opportunity to develop the life skills necessary to regulate our emotions and use them to our advantage.

## **Games of Stamina and Dexterity**

**RING THE STICK** - A hoop of any size was tied to a length of rawhide or sinew and attached to a stick. The hoop was swung upward and as it came down, the player tried to put the end of the stick through the hoop. The ring had to start from a position flat on the ground before being thrown up into the air. In competition with each other, the players took turns and the player getting the most rings out of an agreed number of turns was the winner. Generally the hoop size was made according to the age of the players with a large hoop made for the youngest and a smaller hoop and longer stick made for older children and adults. This was mainly a social game played for fun but develops coordination and motor skills.

**RUN AND SCREAM** - The children would start running while sucking in a big breath of air; at a designated mark on the ground, they would start screaming while they were running. When the scream was finished, the spot was marked with each person's own marker stick (4 to 6 inch long peg sharpened to go into the ground). The children would try to pass the other marks. The one who could run the farthest while screaming was the winner. Traditionally played by girls too old for dolls and too young for adult games, but can be played by all ages of children.

**MAKE THE STICK JUMP** - A favorite game of Blackfoot boys, but can be played by anyone. It was a game of throwing accuracy designed to improve the boys' ability to kill small game birds or rabbits. A stick of 6 to 8 inches was carved and decorated with feathers by young boys. The boys would place their sticks at different distances from a line. Numbers or points were awarded to each stick with the closest stick having the smallest score and the farthest stick given the highest score. The boys would stand behind a line then throw a set number of rocks at the sticks. If a rock hit a stick directly, it would make the stick jump and the points for that stick were awarded. The sticks could be laced on the ground or stuck into the ground so one end would stand up. Both methods were used.

**MODERN KICKBALLS** – All Indigenous people in North America had some type of kick balls used for racing, hackey sack (foot bag) types of games, and sling ball types of games. Modern Indigenous youth adopted the Zuni and Tewa style of kick bag because, when racing over the prairie, the ball often would go down a ground squirrel hole. The tail on the ball assures a safer way of getting it back out of the hole. Kickball races are won by the person whose ball and body cross the finish line first. Long ago races could be 10 – 300 miles.

*Paiute Football:* Four players advance down a 50-foot field to place kick their balls between tripod goals. The ball must pass under one of the three sticks of the tripod first to be the winner. (Ball must be advanced without the use of hands)

*Northern Cheyenne:* A race is run by two runners, down the alleyway and back, with the runner whose body and ball crosses the line first as the winner.

*Tewa:* The contestants lie on their backs holding the tail of the sling ball between their feet and then sling the ball backward overhead. The sling ball going the farthest distance in the air is the winner.

*Northern Cheyenne:* This game is played by one person against another or by one pair against another. The goal is to keep the foot bag up in the air by kicking it to oneself or back and forth between partners. The person or pair that keeps the foot bag up for the greatest number of kicks is the winner.

LINE TAG (Blackfoot) - All playing members make a line holding hands. The idea of the game is for the first person in line to tag the last person in line. Everyone else tries to help the first person. If the line breaks, the last person goes to the front of the line to become the "tagger." Every time the last person is tagged, they become the "tagger" at the front of the line. The idea of the game is to avoid being "tagged" longer than anyone else. The social skills in this game include cooperation, and encouragement. Strength is important as the chasers try to keep the line together and the person being chased works against the numerical advantage of the chasers.

DOUBLE BALL- "When we judge others, it is from our own cultural context. "There is no "right or wrong" way to play double ball, just different ways."

Cree: Double ball was played primarily by women. It was a very rigorous game, demanding top physical condition; the goals were placed up to a mile apart.

Equipment: A stick about three feet long. Long ago, the double ball was made from two bags of deerskin stuffed with buffalo hair and joined by a leather thong. A dumb bell shaped beanbag or any two small balls, which can be fastened together, can be used.

How to Play:

1. The game can be played on a football or soccer field or on any area where the goals are at least 100 yards apart.
2. There can be from four to eight players on a team.
3. The game is similar to lacrosse, except the ball is only moved by throwing it with the stick. It cannot be touched with the hands or feet.
4. The game begins with one player throwing the ball toward center field. The ball, once caught by a player, cannot be carried on the stick. It must be passed from one player to another.
5. Players can try to hook the ball by knocking it off their opponent's stick.
6. The team that throws the ball across the goal line wins the game.

Blackfoot: According to Richard Horn, a Blackfoot traditional games teacher, often a woman would call a double ball game whose husband was not treating her well. The women would come together for a tough game to show the men their power and strength. The men would watch and tease the man whose wife called the game together. It was said the man usually treated his wife better after that.

Assiniboine: Originated from using a portion of the entrails of the harvested buffalo and flinging it with a stick into the "goal." Harvesting buffalo was always hard, but happy work and the game evolved from the play of young women who didn't want to touch the parts of the buffalo.

A target was set at each end of a play area and teams formed spontaneously. The game was informal, without rules, but important in bringing the community together. This is important because it is recorded that the split between the Assiniboine from the rest of the Sioux resulted from a dispute over possession of buffalo. The story of great buffalo harvests remains through stories of elders and games like this. (Credit to Tim Eashappie – ECUR 352)

HOOP AND ARROW - The earth begins to awaken in March. Winter supplies of food were low at this time of the year and the men had to travel in search of large game. The youth were taught the hoop and arrow games to become skillful at bringing down small game for the community while the men were gone. The hoop and arrow games taught honesty through, "truth in scoring," and skills necessary for hunting as a means of survival.

*Pend d'Orielle Hoop & Arrow game:* A long pole is laid on the ground about fifteen feet from the players. A non-player rolls the ring so it will hit the pole and fall down. The two players throw their arrows toward the place where they think the ring, after it hits the pole, will fall on an arrow, thereby awarding them the number of points as assigned to the color of the beads touching the arrow. The six beads are of different color and represent different points as agreed upon by the players before starting the game. Players seek the highest number of points per round for a win. Points may be added together for a team vs. team game.

*Salish Hoop & Dart game:* Six players from each team line the opposite sides of a 30' long x 10' wide alleyway and attempt to throw their dart through a netted hoop that is thrown to roll down the alleyway. Players toss their darts at the rolling hoop in an attempt to slow it and make it fall on their own dart. The dart must be in the netting in order to score points. Points are awarded by 1 one for anywhere in the netting and 3 for the center hole in the netting. The team gains points by adding individual scores together. The team with the most points by the end of the playing time will win.

*Crow: "A-ba-tsink'-i-sha":* is a netted hoop game played with two darts that have trident ends. The game is played by rolling a hoop toward an end log as two players attempt to throw a dart through the netted hoop center. If the dart passes into the net and stays as the hoop falls, thereby trapping the dart, a score of one point is given. The game is played until a certain score is achieved or one player gets a "bulls' eye," (kills the bull).

*"Painyanka ichute" Yankton Sioux Fort Peck.* Painyanka means, "Shooting the Buffalo." The game is played with two players representing two sides, who throw one set of sticks each at the hoop as it rolls past. When the hoop falls, hopefully on the sticks, the scores are counted. The hoop represents a gathering of all Sioux Nations, and in past days, the chief's family could locate all bands upon the hoop. The hoop also represented the rim of the horizon and the four quarters of the earth. The spaces mark the openings or passes into the circle of the gathering. They also represent the four winds and are invoked as such by the thrower before he throws.

**STICKS** - Each team places sticks (pool noodles) in their territory. Once the hoops have been placed, they may only be touched by members of the opposite team. The objective is to capture all the hoops. This means you must sneak into the other team's territory to capture their hoops while also protecting your own hoops.

- If you are captured in the other team's territory you must sit and wait to be rescued by a teammate, who may safely walk you back to your side while holding your hand.
- You are safe if standing in another team's hoop and the hoop is on the ground.
- If you get captured while holding a hoop you must put the hoop down (it remains there). You may not take it with you when you are rescued.

Once you place a captured hoop in your territory it may no longer be moved by anyone on your team.

**FEATHER DARTS:** materials - various turkey feathers, string, and target.

Background info - this is start of acquiring skill to hit a moving target. The target is hung on a string. The player holds a feather and stands beside the target. The player takes 2 natural walking strides away. 2 natural strides = their body length. Then, the player will turn and throw the feather dart at target. Each player gets a second shot. The second shot has to be done with other hand. The reason is so they can develop ambidextrous skills. Once players are able to hit the target, then take a couple more strides away. If they are successful, then pendulum swing the target and then let the players attempt to hit the target while it is in motion. Players must use both hands.

WHIPPING TOPS -This game was usually played on ice, and teams of at least two boys played it. Each team had a top and each boy had a whip; a stick with a piece of rawhide attached to one end. A team kept the top spinning by whipping it. The team whose top keeps spinning the longest wins or the top could be made to race along a path towards a finish line.

STICK PULL GAME - was used to help strengthen the hands and wrist of the Dene and prepare them for the fishing season. Often large fish swam along the shores and rivers enabling the Dene easy access. They would simply reach down and grab the fish near the middle of its back and throw it up on the land or shoreline. Though it may sound easy, the ability to grab a 20-pound whitefish or an aggressive Pike out of the water and toss it up on the shore required quickness, eye-hand coordination and incredible wrist and finger strength. Fish are often very slippery to hold and being able to grab a heavy fish out of the water is very difficult. So in order to remain strong and able Dene men would challenge each other in a stick pull.

- The stick is approximately 25 centimeters (12 inches) long, with a center diameter of 2.5 centimeters (1 inch)
- The stick has to be greased with Crisco oil or lard to create a very slippery surface.
- Opponents will stand with feet shoulder width apart and the right foot of one participant will touch the right foot of the other participant.
- On the signal, "Ready, Pull", the opponents to try and pull the stick out of each other's hand. Students cannot jerk or twist the stick or bend the arm during the stick pull. Students are not allowed to lean forward or to the side.
- There are two ways to win the game, a student must be able to pull the stick back beyond his/her waist (or hip) and hold the stick in this position for a 2 second count or he/she can pull the stick out of the other student's hand. (Credit to Roxanne Noltcho Sylvester – ECUR 352)

CORRALING THE BUFFALLO (Cree) - Long before the arrival of the horse, the First Nations people had to devise a method to capture the buffalo. Many of the Plains people developed corrals or they would stampede the herds over cliffs if any were nearby. All the Nations from the Cree south to the Sioux in the United States adopted this method. As the plains were usually vast sprawling expanses of flat land, the Cree were the masters of building corrals in order to herd the buffalo in. The children were taught the importance of a successful hunt and they often played this game early on in life as this enabled them to hone their skills at capturing the buffalo later in life. One famous chief of the Plains Cree, Poundmaker took the name of his grandfather, who was an expert at building these contraptions. Just like his grandfather, Poundmaker was a renowned buffalo pound maker and that is where his name is derived from. Since there were no horses available until the Europeans arrived, the people who were able to build these corrals were held in high esteem because the survival of the community depended on the ability of the corrals to keep the stampeding buffalo in the corral. Once the animals were in the pens, they were then butchered and this ensured the survival of the people as everything they used and needed essentially came from the buffalo.

In closing, this game was used by the Cree in the northern and southern plains of Saskatchewan. The children were taught to play this game and the idea and importance of the community's survival hinged on their ability to work together as a team and this idea was carried on through the rest of their hunting lives.

There will be two teams of 6 hunters to a team and one buffalo and the boundaries of the prairie will be marked off. The team will have 3 minutes to try and corral the prey without the hunter and prey touching each other, much like the game of *tag*. The team that can successfully herd their prey will get 5 points and if the prey can successfully dodge his opponents will get 5 points. After time has elapsed, the other team will have a chance to chase the prey. (Credit to Conrad Martell – ECUR 352)

**TANTANKA TATANKA** – (Tatanka is the leader of the buffalo) Tatanka, Tatanka comes from the Dakota people. It is a game that is usually played by women and small children; they would mimic their fathers and grandfathers who used to go on the buffalo hunt. The game helped the women and children learn how to lead the buffalo into the compound during the hunt. The game is aimed at younger kids so they can learn these skills early on and be experts when it was their time to go on the hunt.

The only equipment needed then was a Tatanka head; they would most likely be playing in a chosen open area or the buffalo compound. There were no prizes as the game was for fun and to learn survival skills.

During the buffalo hunt everyone who as able bodied to help would do so. This game taught the women and children how to help out when they needed to. It also taught them the basics of chasing, running, and fleeing.

This game would be played in the spring and summer before the big buffalo hunt so they would be prepared to help out when the time came. The game was taught so women and children were able to do their part during the buffalo hunt. Everyone needed to take part in this hunt because it was such a big task and their survival depended on the buffalo. The fleeing, running, and chasing were important because they would be leading buffalo that were most likely stampeding and if they couldn't run away when they needed to then they could be injured.

Rules:

One student is chosen as the Tatanka and the rest of the student's line up against the wall. The Tatanka calls out "Tatanka, Tatanka" and the students run across to the other side of the gym and try not to get tagged by the Tatanka. If a student is tagged they become part of the Tatanka's herd and have to try tag more students to become part of the herd. When there are no more runners the game is over and new Tatanka is chosen. (Credit to Rachel Thomas, Janice Apeis, and Tim Eashappie – ECUR 352)

## **Games of Intuition and Chance**

**STICKS IN THE FIST**-This game of pure intuition and chance is played with ten sticks, cut to fit in a fist. One stick is marked on the bottom. This game of probability encourages the player to "sense" the stick which is marked, and to draw as many unmarked sticks as possible before drawing the marked stick. Drawing nine unmarked sticks with the marked as last draw, is the highest honor. Playing with the set of sticks more than once, gives the player a greater chance of using "observation" instead of "sensing" to win the game. Both skills are admired.

**THE TIE UP GAME** (Inuit & Turtle Mt. Chippewa) - In the traditional culture of some Indigenous peoples, there was a way of making young people learn to work together. If two young people were fighting or arguing, an uncle or aunt would often tie the two together in a way that cooperation between the two had to occur or they would not be able to get out of the tie-up. In this game, the two would be loosely connected by one rope passing over the other person's rope with both ends of each rope simply holding each wrist with a slipknot. The two players are told that they must work together to become separated from each other "without taking the slip knots off their wrists." After much encouragement to keep trying or after both players are talking to one another and cooperating with one another, the children could be released without telling them the solution. The social skills are sharing, cooperating, and conflict resolving.

**PLUM STONE** - Teams of 1-10 players face each other leaving space of 3 feet.

Put counting sticks on the ground between teams and the plum stones, or cut antler buttons in a basket.

- Each team has one person toss; high score starts.
- Players on the first team keep basket, taking turns, until a stone lands on the ground or a "no score" is tossed.
- Object of the game is to get all the sticks.

2 moons, 3 white = 3 sticks

2 stars, 3 whites = 3 sticks

2 moons, 3 black = 2 sticks

2 stars, 3 black = 2 sticks

1 star, 1 moon, 3 white = 1 stick

1 star, 1 moon, 3 black = 1 stick

**GUESSING THE STICK** - "How many sticks" was a guessing game to test perception, intuition, and observation, played quietly by the children as the adults played their hand games. Any number of small straight sticks were gathered (at least 20) and put into a bundle to be held by one person. The bundle was divided and held in each hand then quickly shown to two other players who looked at the bundles before they were hidden or guessed. The object of the game was to estimate how many sticks were in each bundle. The one whose guess was exactly right was the winner. The winner of the guess is given one of the counting pegs. The winner of the game is when one person accumulates all three counting pegs. A GAME FOR ALL AGES

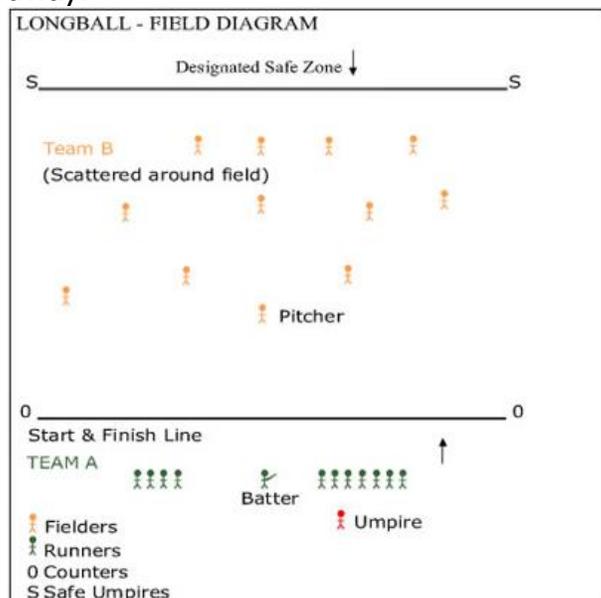
### LONGBALL (Eastern Woodlands)

#### Equipment:

Baseball bat Soft ball the size of a normal baseball (safe to throw at a person) 2 - 9.15 meters (30ft) ropes or chalked lines.

#### Playing Field

The playing field should be approximately 15-23 meters (50-75 feet) long and with no width boundaries. The Finish & Start line is placed at one end with the safe line parallel to it but 15-23 meters (50-75 feet) away.



## **Gameplay**

- Divide the players into two teams.
- Select a pitcher, an umpire and a catcher (an adult or neutral player's) for the entire game.
- Outfield Team - has no assigned positions, should be scattered between the start/finish line and the safe line. No outfield player can be positioned behind the two lines.
- Batting Team - selects a batter who will be the batter for the entire time this team is up to bat. Batter does not run. The batter has 3 good pitches to hit the ball (the umpire and pitcher decides if it is a good pitch).
- Fouls - no foul balls except behind the start/finish line. If the batter misses three good pitches this is counted as an out. Three outs are required before the teams switch positions.
- Batting Team - Runners are the remaining players from this team. They are positioned along each side of the batter who is in the middle of the start/finish line.
- Hitting the Ball
  - Runners: once the ball is hit into the fair ground, the runners run toward the safe line and back if possible. Runners can no longer be called out or hit once they cross the safe line. At least one runner must make it to the safe line and back to the start/finish line after each hit.
  - Outfield: the outfield team must catch the ball to get an out or they can throw the ball at the opposing team below the waist. If a ball throw goes above the waist it will count as a point for the opposing team.
  - Outs: Three outs are required to switch team positions. The outfield team can try to get three outs on one hit.
  - Points Scored: A point is scored every time a runner makes it from the start line to the safe line and back to the finish line. If the hit is good the runners can continue to run back and forth from each line as many times as possible, until an out is made. Note: remember that at least one runner must make it from start line to the safe line and back each time the ball is hit. The final score can get high into the 100's, thus scorekeepers are required.
  - Innings: Three innings are played because the score increases quickly.

## **Resources**

International Traditional Games Society (<http://www.traditionalnativegames.org/>)

Saskatoon Public School Division; First Nations, Inuit & Métis Education Unit

Games researched and presented by students in ECUR 352-29, Methods in Elementary Physical Education

Cullen, Stewart. Games of the North American Indian

<http://www.denegames.ca/dene-games/stick-pull-rules.html>

<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Traditions/English/index.html>

<http://www.uwlax.edu/mvac/knowledge/NAGames.htm>

## **Reading**

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- Robinson, D., Lunney, L., Robinson, I. (2013) Charting a Course for Culturally Responsive Physical Education. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 58, (4) 542-546.
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