

# GAME ON! Life Lessons in Native American Games

What's your favorite game or sport? Do you need any special skills to play it, or do you learn anything while playing it? The First Peoples of the Americas had many different games for both individual and team competitions. These traditional Native American games might have been fun, but they often had a deeper purpose and meaning behind them. For example, many of these games taught important survival skills or life lessons. Furthermore, they also often had religious or ceremonial significance. For instance, as a way of giving thanks during the Midwinter Ceremony of the Iroquois, participants played games to make the Creator laugh, as well as to please the animal and plant world.

Read on to learn more about some traditional Native American games. As you read each description, can you guess what skills or lessons the game taught and why they were important to these cultures?

## HOOP & POLE

Different Native American groups had different ways to play the Hoop and Pole game, but all versions of this game involve a long stick or dart and some kind of circular hoop. In some versions, the hoop would be rolled along the ground while two players tried to hit or throw their pole through the hoop. In other versions, someone might throw the hoop and players would attempt to catch, or "spear," the hoop before it hit the ground. The hoops, which were typically woven in a spider web pattern, usually had a specific design in each tribe. Often these designs were intended to help with scoring, but they also sometimes represented stories in their cultures. For instance, each of the holes in the hoop used by the Grosventre had a name representing an animal, with the center hole representing the heart.



A student learns how to play a version of Hoop and Pole during a field trip to the Institute for American Indian Studies.

What skills could hoop and pole teach? Many traditional Native American groups relied on hunting to get food. The game taught a skill that was very valuable for hunting: hand-eye coordination. You probably use hand-eye coordination in your daily life. If you play table tennis or baseball you are using hand-eye coordination. In traditional Native American communities, hand eye coordination was an important survival skill because you needed it to hunt and fish.

## MOCCASIN AND HUBBUB

Many traditional Native American games involved something called "chance." Perhaps you've played a game before and someone has said, "winning is all about luck." Traditional Native American games such as Moccasin and Hubbub fall into the category of games of chance. Even though these games involve a bit of luck, they can also teach lessons and sometimes require a bit of strategy.

As with many of the other games described in this article, the specific rules and items used to play Moccasin varied from tribe to tribe, and it is still played in Native American communities today. Generally, it involves several moccasins, or even pieces of cloth. Players hide an item, such as a stick or a stone, under one of the "moccasins." By moving the moccasins around, or placing their closed fist under each moccasin, they try to make it difficult for the other player to guess which moccasin the object is under.

Some tribes believe that the original Moccasin game was played to decide who had the right to hunt in certain areas. Long ago, it was likely played to win arrows for hunting or to settle arguments. In most cases, today, though, players compete to win brightly colored sticks and just for the fun of it. Believe it or not, the game can last for hours, as players try to win every last stick.

Hubbub is a traditional Native American game from the tribes of New England. You may have heard people use the term "hubbub" as a way to describe a noisy event. That likely comes from the way this game was traditionally played. Players would have a bowl and five games pieces, made of wood, stone, seeds or shell. Each game piece would have different colored sides or markings. Participants would take turns shaking the bowl up and down, while yelling "Hub! Hub! Hub!" which translates to "Come! Come!" Then they would reveal the game pieces. Points would be awarded based on whether all five pieces had the same colored side facing up, or whether there was a mixture of different colors facing up. Much like with the game of Moccasin, players often played for sticks. The game could go on for hours and was often played quite loudly, as friends cheered each other on or opponents taunted each other.

Even if winning these games involves a bit of luck, they can teach important skills or life lessons, as well. For one thing, players learn how to read each others' body language. They also involve some strategy, and even some team work. Perhaps more importantly, these games can also be used to strengthen friendships and settle disagreements. In some cases, though, laws were put in place saying that Native Americans could not play these games of chance. How would it make you feel if you were not allowed to play your favorite game?



Native American boys play the Moccasin game circa 1938. Source: National Archives and Records Administration, uploaded to Wikimedia Commons. Image in the public domain.

## LACROSSE

Do you, or does someone you know, play lacrosse? If so, you're playing a game that was first played by Native Americans. The game of lacrosse you are familiar with is probably played on a flat, green field with goal posts on either end. Players on a team toss a ball to each other using sticks with nets at the end, as the other team tries to stop them from getting the ball into their goal. The game lasts about an hour, has 10 players on a team, and is played for fun. The traditional game of lacrosse was very different from the game that people play today, though. In fact, it was a very serious game that had a very important purpose.

In traditional lacrosse, entire villages might join in, so there could be hundreds of players. The only boundaries were natural ones. The game might take place over miles and last an entire day, or longer! It was also a very rough game; much rougher than the game of lacrosse today. This is because, for many tribes, lacrosse was known as the "Little Brother of War." If there was a disagreement between two villages or tribes, they might settle it by playing lacrosse. Whichever team won the game, won the argument. It was such an important sport, that some tribes also called it "The Creator's Game."

Traditional and modern lacrosse both teach teamwork. You need to work together in order to have a chance at winning. Traditional lacrosse taught more than just teamwork. It strengthened players' endurance and taught players how to overcome personal or group obstacles. Additionally, as a traditional Iroquois lacrosse story reminds players, the game teaches that each player could add value to their team. (<https://iroquoisnationals.org/the-iroquois/the-story-of-lacrosse/>)

In modern times, some Native Americans continue to play lacrosse. While they play by the same rules that other modern teams do, they take pride in playing a game that holds such a special place in their history. Watch the following video about young Native Americans learning to play lacrosse: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJK69xCza1E> of youth learning how to play lacrosse.



Photo Credit: Master Sgt Daniel Ewer. Image in the public domain.

Native American youth playing modern lacrosse in 2012. The Minnesota Army National Guard, in partnership with the National Lacrosse League's Minnesota Swarm and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa participated in the third annual Lax-4-Life Camp.

## NATIVE AMERICAN VIDEO GAMES

You read that correctly: Native American video games. In modern times, while they might sometimes play traditional games, Native Americans also enjoy many of the same games and sports that you do. Some even love to play video games. In recent years, there have even been examples of Native peoples using video games to help preserve parts of their culture for younger generations. One interesting example is the game *Never Alone*, originally released in 2014 for PlayStation4 and Xbox One. The game, which is rated T, has since been adapted for other platforms, and has been downloaded millions of times. *Never Alone* is based upon a traditional Inupiat story and features a set of puzzles and challenges set in the Arctic landscape. Throughout the game, community elders and storytellers share stories that provide clues for the players. Creating this game was a community effort as multiple generations of Inupiat came together to help preserve their culture and make an enjoyable gaming experience. For more information, please visit: <http://neveralongame.com/>.

**Sources:** Tara Prindle, "Netted Hoop and Pole Game," *Native American Technology and Art*, 1994; Annawon Weeden (Mashpee Wampanoag), *Boston Children's Museum*, December 2015; Michael Zimny, "Moccasin: A Traditional Native American Game Evolving Over Time," *South Dakota Public Broadcasting*, June 2015; George Garvin (Ho-Chunk/Meskwaki), *Native Report.org*, Jan 2017; Trudie Richmond (Schaghticoke), *Artifacts*, "Games of Chance," *Institute for American Indian Studies*, 1980; Denise Waterman (Oneida Nation), "The Story of Lacrosse," *Iroquois Nationals website*.



38 Curtis Road | Washington, CT 06793 | 860-868-0518

The Institute for American Indian Studies Museum & Research Center preserves and educates through discovery and creativity the diverse traditions, vitality and knowledge of Native American cultures.

[www.iaismuseum.org](http://www.iaismuseum.org)

[nieonline.com/courantnie](http://nieonline.com/courantnie)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4, 6, 7 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.6, 5.1

