

# Eskimo games emphasized endurance, nerve, toughness

reprinted from *Tundra Times*  
February 18, 1963

## by Howard Rock

Founder of the *Tundra Times*

The ancient Eskimos of the Arctic were ardent followers of sports contests whenever an occasion presented itself. Contests were held as integral parts of whaling celebrations and other auspicious occasions.

A competition would become so keen that toward its conclusion much suspense built up as to which of the men had the most endurance, nerve, and toughness, and which of the participants would be first to say "uncle."

The characteristic Eskimos have always seemed to lean toward toughness. To keep their toughness sharpened the ancient Eskimos developed some contests that certainly required that trait.

Such contests emphasized toughness which the men especially needed to have in their pursuit of hunting. A tough man was certainly looked upon with something of an awe by the community. The contests certainly brought the tough men out into the open and they were respected and admired, especially by the youth.

## Two Factions

In the whaling community of Tigara (Point Hope), the village, apparently through centuries past, was divided into two factions or sections, the north side and the south side. The north side was called *qarqmaknuuq* and the south side *ungasaksikaaq*.

Each side had a roughly corresponding number of whaling captains and crews. The main purpose of this setup was competition between the two factions to see which side would catch more whales.

At the end of a successful season both sides celebrated. The first celebration was held by whichever side had celebrated second the season before. When the south side, for instance, finished its festivities, the celebrants moved to the north side.

At each of these celebrations, the *nalukatuk* (blanket toss), feasting and dancing, were performed along with visiting, and

friendly banter.

## Loser Challenges

When celebrations on both sides had been completed, games or contests were started. The opening performance was usually a tug of war between the north and the south. The loser of this event picked out the next challenging event.

The challenge might be Eskimo football or wrestling where rules were liberal. Such things as clipping were allowed. If you felt reasonably safe from retaliation, one might dig his opponent's face into the ground. It usually got rough enough where some broken bones resulted.

Another challenge might be a foot race between the two factions. To the east of Tigara is a small hill five miles away. The runners rounded a certain point agreed upon to come back to the starting point. The trouble with the track was that about a four mile stretch of it was gravel. When you kicked for a stride, you slipped back about six inches.

## Becomes Difficult

As the challenges progressed, they became tougher. High kicks were performed where the better ones kicked up to nine feet. The requirement for this sport was to kick both feet into the air simultaneously and kick a suspended ball with both feet at the same time. To touch the ball with one toe did not count.

Next came the ear pull. The men had their wives make a braided loop of sinew to about the size of fine twine. The idea was to loop one end around the ear of one man and the other end around the ear of the opponent.

The contest begins by slowly tightening the loop with the base of the ears. The tension was built up to a straining pull until one of the opponents gave up. Both contestants usually come out of this when the sinew had broken the skin and dug into the flesh.

Next came the skull crush. The idea of this one was to clasp one's hand around the back of the neck of the opponent. The two men then began to pull each other's neck, straining hard forehead to

forehead.

When one gave up, a sizable goose-egg usually resulted on the forehead of each man.

## Swollen Knuckles

The next contest was a knuckle and toe hop. A starting line was marked. A contestant got on his belly on the floor at the starting line, doubled his fists and then suspended his body resting on his knuckles and toes.

It began with the contestant hopping on his knuckles and toes across the floor rounding a point on the opposite end of the starting line.

A good contestant could stride about two feet at a time and the winner was the one who rounded the floor more times than his opponents. When this was over, the contestants came out with highly swollen knuckles.

Next came the difficult and one of the most painful contests. The contestant had to be a tough man to be in this contest.

A starting line was required for this one also. The participant took off his mukluks and socks. At the starting line he hopped lightly coming down on his toes. The significant part of this was, that he landed on the knuckles of his toes which he had doubled back at the light leap.

At this position the contestant commenced to hop across the floor landing each time on the knuckles of his toes. It was not hard to wince each time he landed with an unmistakable sound of bone hitting the hard floor.

## Need Nerves

Next came the contest that was usually done as a finale of the games. To perform in this contest was to have a good set of nerves as well as toughness.

A piece of stout driftwood of about a yard long was whittled so that it had knife-sharp edge.

The contestant then would lie down in a prone position on the ground or on the floor. Then two men stood on each side of him taking hold of the piece of wood at each end and placed the knife edge against the bridge of the nose of the contestant who was lying prone

The contestant stiffened his body as the two men slowly started lifting at each end of the stick. If the contestant didn't falter he was lifted into a standing position with the knife edge on the bridge of his nose.

The result of this, of course, was a clean cut to the bone.

And so, the ancient Eskimos took their games seriously. They were geared to the conditions around them, that of necessity of maintaining ruggedness, toughness, and stamina. They considered those as vital in their struggle for survival.

There were, of course, light and amusing games that were played. But in the name of keen competition difficult contests were held and they never failed



Howard Rock  
1911 to 1976