

These officials score achievement, not penalties

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

Sports officials usually are the bad guys.

The "necessary evil" of the playing field.

The persons whom the coaches and players vent their wrath upon, and the ones they can blame when the game is lost.

Not so with the officials of the arctic Native sports.

An American sports fan who is unfamiliar with Native games, might be a little surprised to see athletes and officials treating each other with new respect, and even compassion.

"It is our tradition," explains Jerry Kisoun the Yukon Territory's chief official at the Arctic Winter Games. George Bennett of Fairbanks and Steve Kikoak of the Northwest Territories, who are also officials, agree.

"The athletes and the officials know the game," Kikoak adds. "The athletes have been trained before never to argue with the judges. We respect our elders. That is our culture."

"You are not really competing against anyone," Kisoun emphasizes. "Only yourself, trying to make yourself do your best. There is even good communication between athletes and officials. If a kid's foot is going on one side of the seal, we will mention it to him, we can give him advice."

"You know, Bennett, who has long been involved as a participant, coach and official of sports such as basketball and youth track and field, of all the years I have been in real hard core, competitive sports, this is the only time I have ever seen officials have compassion for the participants. We can shout words of encouragement to them. If the coach comes up, we can talk and tell him what's going on, what his athlete needs to do."

It is this attitude of mutual concern, Bennett says, which really holds Native sports together. "If it ever happens, that we would be at each others' throats, like someone from Alaska saying, 'hey, don't talk to that Yukon guy!' then I don't think the games would be viable."

The judges also agreed that it is important for them to all work together. "It's team work," explains Bennett. "We must all agree on a decision. One official is usually design-

nated head, but to us three here, there is no such thing as a head official."

Usually, an official is someone who has participated in the games themselves as have both Kisoun and Kikoak. Bennett has never competed in the Native games, but has been involved in sports and coaching for most of his life and last year took a team to the Native youth Olympics in Anchorage. Despite all his time in other sports, he describes his involvement in Native games as "the plateau of my career."

There is no rule book for officials at Native games. The rules are learned the traditional way, by participation. Sometimes there are tough decisions. "We came across a situation which was very rare," Bennett notes, referring to this year's match between Lady Laraux and Carol Pickett when each missed five-foot, 10-inches on the two-foot high kick then tried nine-and-one-half height. Laraux worked her way back up to five-foot, 11-inches.

The officials could have decided that Laraux was not entitled to try the 5-foot, 10-inch height because she already had tried and missed but they decided to allow her the "second chance."

Then there was the airplane carry competition. The word the officials received from the stand was that they should time the period in which a contestant is able to keep his arms and legs extended in an iron cross while being carried around the gym.

"We finally went with the distance," Bennett notes. "Distance had been more into the games years and years ago. We didn't want to introduce too much modern technology, like a stop watch," said Bennett.



As the coach of Team Yukon (in back) looks on, Native sports officials (left to right) Steve Kikoak, George Bennett, and Jerry Kisoun debate Lady Laraux's most recent kick.

"We've got to be careful with this technology. Or in five years time, we'll be bringing a professor down from the university to show us how to do our own games!" says Kisoun.

"We've been playing Eskimo games for thousands of years," Kikoak inserts, "this stop watch, I didn't agree with it in my mind."

There was another aspect to this year's games that bothered the officials. The ear pull and seal hop and the knuckle hop were eliminated from the competition, supposedly because they could get too bloody for spectators.

"I would like to see that the known officials get notified before such decisions are handed down," Bennett stresses. "We don't even know the people are who eliminated those two games. We were not notified."

All three thought the two traditional events should have been kept in the competition. "If you're going to the Arctic Winter Games, Bennett says, "what's going to happen is on the program schedule. If you don't want to see something, you can leave when that comes up. People shouldn't voice against it. They're voicing against our culture."

"Take a boxing match," Kisoun adds. "You see more blood at a boxing match than you ever will at Native games. The first I saw blood was in 1980, when a contestant ripped his ear!"

Bryan Goelting, a white man from Copper Mine, Northwest Territory, who has participated in the Games in the past, and who helped run the events along with the three officials also believes the traditional aspects of the games

should be honored.

"I've been involved in the games a long time, I've been an organizer of teams and I've raised money. I've gotten to know most of the people involved in the games all across the arctic, from Alaska to Greenland. The reasons I'm involved is that Native games are not like white games, like basketball and volleyball. There is no competition. It's a friendly game. The whole point of arctic sports is fun. There is a chance to meet your friends."

Goehring also does not like to see Native sports treated as a novelty or a sideshow while the rest of the games like badminton, hockey, snowshoeing are taken more seriously.

Bennett agrees, "Our games have been in existence for thousands and thousands of years. It is serious sport."