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Playing mind games: Native American tradition remains popular

By [Holden Parrish](#) - Assistant City Editor

FORT HALL - The old man from Alberta stared intensely, locking his eyes on his rival from Fort Hall.

Several feet across from him, the opponent rocked back and forth, his crossed arms moving up and down in sync with a loud, powerful rhythm of native drums and voices - the song of his teammates.

In his hands were two bones, one white and one striped. In his eyes was a look of confidence and a gaze just as intense as the old man's.

The man from Alberta began to rock, too, and his Fort Hall foe smiled in return. Then, with a quick hand gesture, the old man made his guess.

It was wrong.

The rival's smile turned into laughter, his teammates' song became celebration.

The game was over. The home team had won, and the pile of cash on the grass in the middle was its prize.

"It's a mind game," observed Clinton Houtz, an activities overseer at the Shoshone-Bannock Festival, the four-day event that began Thursday night and concluded Sunday.

"It's a guessing game, but there is some skill," he added.

Of course, Houtz was referring to a favorite tribal pastime best known as "stick game."

For casual onlookers, stick game contests can be a bit overwhelming. Still, Houtz insists anyone can play the game, which he said is a Native American tradition and has existed "since forever."

Stick game is played with 11 sticks and two sets of bones.

Five sticks are dealt to each team. Both compete for the extra 11th stick, which would give either an advantage.

Once the sticks have been distributed, the defending team captain picks two team members to hold and hide a pair of bones, one white and one striped. Most other teammates drum and sing.

The attacking team captain must guess in which hands the opponents are holding the white bones. Guess wrong, and the attacking team loses a stick to the defenders. The hider then discretely shuffles the bones, and the guessing begins anew.

Once the whereabouts of both white bones have been correctly guessed, the attackers become the defenders and the cycle is repeated until one side has no more sticks.

Houtz said stick games can last five minutes or four hours, and money isn't all that's bet. He said cows, horses and clothing are sometimes laid on the line.

There was a lot of money riding on Sunday's games, but nothing compared to Saturday's tournament, which paid \$10,000 to the first-place team and \$6,000 to second place.

"Usually, the ones sticking around (Sunday) are the ones who didn't do so well (in the tournament)," Houtz said. "Those who won the pot have already taken off."

Larry Bill, a Yakima tribesman from White Swan, Wash., said kids are the best at hiding bones.

"You don't know what they're thinking. You can't see anything in their eyes," he explained.

Although children might have an advantage as hidiers, Bill said anyone can be a good guesser.

His advice for beginners?

"Watch the old people," he said. "They're tricky."

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