



Sons of Norway Information Banks

## #233: VIKING GAMES

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### INTRODUCTION

Between 800 AD – 1100 AD the Vikings ruled the north and explored the world around them in handmade longboats. In their time the Vikings were a storied people, known for their great size, strength and precise navigational skills. Their brutal and competitive nature was their survival tool and, until recently, their legacy rested primarily on these traits. But research is now showing that Vikings spent much of their downtime enjoying games with family and friends. Icelandic Archeologist, Leszek Gardela has researched Viking games, looking for clues to explain why and how these games were played. His research shows that “the games were very physical and often brutal, sometimes even ending in serious injury or death.” The games were a way of displaying their strength and masculinity back at home as well as providing opportunities to train for battle.

Today the games are enjoying a resurgence, though the days of violent and even fatal games are gone. Instead, they are being played in much safer variations by Viking reenactment clubs and Norwegian youth camps throughout Sons of Norway.

If you, or your group, would like to have some fun and try an authentic Viking game you can find a list of different options and their instruction below.

### PHYSICAL VIKING GAMES

By today’s standards many Viking games, and their intensity level, are incomprehensible. For example, wrestling duels to the death and swimming events that pushed competitors to their breaking point, often causing the losers to drown, will never truly be understood today.

However, with modifications for safety, the competition can be enjoyed today without injury. Even so, please show due care when playing or teaching these games at home.

#### **Ståbryting** (Stand Up Wrestling)

Originally, most Viking wrestling matches were training for combat and included throwing individuals onto rocks and other activities that could cause serious injury or death.

Today, a modified version, called stand up wrestling, is a test of one’s balance and strength. Two opponents, similar in height and weight, begin by placing the outside of their right feet side by side while their left feet are spread about 24 inches wide. Opponents clasp hands as if they are arm wrestling and then begin to pull and push the other off balance until the first person to lift a foot or fall loses the game. Then the two wrestlers switch sides and try the same with left feet touching.

#### **Beinbryting** (Leg Wrestling)

Like Ståbryting, leg wrestling requires two opponents of similar height and weight. They start off lying on the ground, side by side on their backs, with their feet in opposite directions. On a count of three the opponents’ inside legs come up and lock around one another while the outside legs must lie flat on the ground. Similar to arm wrestling, the one who



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can successfully use their strength to bring their active leg down flat against the ground and flip their opponent's leg back, which harmlessly flips the person over, is the winner. For the next round the two wrestlers change positions and face-off with opposite legs.

### **Skinntrekk**

During the Viking age this tug of war variant was played with animal pelts, but the modern version can be played with a bath towel instead. The game begins with two participants standing in a circle drawn on the ground that is 6 feet in diameter. Demonstrating their strength and endurance, participants grab hold with both hands on either side of the towel and begin to pull until either the towel is ripped from their opponent's hands or their opponent steps outside of the circle.



District 5's Masse Moro heritage camp staff members prepare for the annual staff versus campers Knattleikr game.

### **Knattleik**

A fierce Viking game that is still played today is Knattleik, also known as Knattleikr, which means "ball game." While archeologists have not found a complete description of how to play the game, they know it was a full contact sport that included a ball and bats. Egils saga, which focused on the life of Egill Skallagrímsson, from 1240 AD describes a scene in which players divided into teams, opponents paired up to guard one another and a ball was caught and run down the field.

A modern version that has been restructured to appeal to youth and reduce the chance of injury uses plastic bats and whiffle balls. The goal is to advance the ball up the field by passing from one player to another, similar to field hockey, so as to score on the opposing team's goal. While there is no

tackling or high sticking above the waist, knattleik is still a physical game with lots of running involved. The sagas suggest that this game was enjoyable to watch and the most widely played game during the Viking Age.

### **Tautrekk**

Another variation of tug of war, like skinntrekk, this game was mentioned in the sagas but with no complete details or descriptions. What we do know is that two participants sat on the ground with knees bent and the soles of the feet touching. Each would grab one end of a rope and pull until one could literally pull their opponent over.

Tautrekk is not a complicated game but it is one that can spark extreme rivalry and emotion. The winners were considered the strongest men and were often chosen as the most prominent rowers in Vikings ships.

### **Spydkast**

One Viking game that has remained in existence is the spear, or javelin, throw, which has become a popular track and field sport. During the Viking age, competitors would throw large rocks, tree trunks, bones and spears as far as they possibly could just to demonstrate their power.

Today the track and field sport is an international competition where participants throw a javelin as far as they can into an open field. A milder version uses thick bamboo spears with foam wrapped around the end meaning the game can be played by almost any age. With a large field and a starting line, participants throw the spear as hard as they can, displaying their strength and accuracy.

## **INTELLECTUAL VIKING GAMES**

Some Vikings used their brains as much as their brawn. In fact, the most successful Vikings were both smart and strong. We know this because the sagas reveal that being good at board games and other non-physical games was essential to becoming a notable Viking leader and game boards, with their corresponding pieces, have been found in a number of archaeological digs.

Like most of the strength-based games no complete instructions or explanations have been found.

### **Hneftafl**

A game of strategy and patience, hneftafl was similar to a game of chess or checkers and a favorite among Vikings. Carvings on ancient memorial stones show the board game design with participants playing one another like a game of chess. Although we don't know the exact rules, the strategy has been mentioned in the sagas. A king must defend himself from an army of surrounding pawns, which were traditionally made from glass, bone, antler, amber, bronze and wood.

There are attackers in the corners, with the goal to kill the king in the center by surrounding him. Defenders protect the king and escort him to a corner without being killed. Whoever meets their goal first, wins the game.

Today, modern versions of this game can be purchased from online retailers, like *Etsy.com* and *Amazon.com*. Simply search for the term "hnefatafl" to find one.



Elvesvingen 1-582, Mankato, MN--Sheryl Sheimo and Linda Stelter play kubb during a midsummer eve celebration.

### **Kubb**

Kubb is a traditional outdoor Scandinavian lawn game, which is fun for all ages. Kubb sets have been commercially available since the early 1990's, and since then the game has gained popularity thanks to YouTube videos, outdoor parties, and formal kubb tournaments. In fact, the Kubb World Championship is held in Gotland, Sweden while the US National Kubb Championship is held in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Kubb can be thought of as a bigger version of Viking chess. The pieces are much larger and the 'game board' is located outside on a rectangular pitch (5m x 8m). The goal is to take over the king, so players need to knock over all the opposing team's blocks by throwing wooden batons at them. The last move, which wins the game, is to knock over the king who located in the middle of the field. According to some sagas, Vikings would play the game with the skulls and femurs of those they conquered in battle. Today, however, the 23 game pieces are made of carved wood and can be easily purchased online or made at home.

### Varpa

Before horseshoes there was varpa. With a similar concept, varpa requires nothing but sticks and stones on a field that measures 30' x 5'. The sticks are placed at each end of the field and, similar to horseshoes, the Varpa throwers heave a disc in such a way that it lands as close as possible to the stick at the end of the course. Each player throws 36 times and the distance from the stick is measured after each throw. The player with the shortest total distance after 36 throws is the winner.



#### Want to learn more?

Check out the article "Play Like a Viking" in the April 2011 issue of *Viking* magazine for more on Viking games. All digital issues of *Viking* magazine (Nov. 2009-present) are available on [sonsofnorway.com](http://sonsofnorway.com)