

Staying in the Game

The Agua Caliente Tribe keeps traditional pastimes alive for the next generation.

BY JUNE ALLAN CORRIGAN



IF YOU'VE EVER found yourself in the sidelines at a lacrosse game, watching players race up and down the field with those long, netted sticks in hand and cheering as the small rubber ball enters the goal, then you've experienced the enduring appeal of one of the oldest sports in modern history.

Lacrosse, originally known as "stickball," traces its origins to a Native American game played by tribes across Canada and the northeastern United States.

The leisure pursuits of a society can provide great insight into its culture and history, and Indigenous communities played a variety of games in

their free time; some served to bring people together, while others were designed to strengthen useful skills, such as toughening up young men or teaching patience and endurance. Despite differences in games across regions and Native American tribes, they all presented an opportunity

ABOVE: Peon players in action.
OPPOSITE: An illustrated depiction of the game "shinny."

to pass down traditions and virtues to younger tribal members, and the traditional games played by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians are no exception.





GAMES WITH INTENT

Simple pastimes such as **foot race games** served a deeper purpose in early Cahuilla culture. Some races pitted two or three runners against each other as they moved a stone or wooden ball from point A to point B. Still, others were mere relay events. Whatever the particulars, foot races helped determine the fastest tribal member to serve as a scout when the tribe was on the move.

“The Cahuilla people could move an entire clan 20 to 40 miles a day, including women and children,” explains John R. Preckwinkle III, Tribal Council Member and former Chairman of the Tribe’s Cultural Preservation

Committee. “Clans were spread out, and one might decide to go from Palm Springs to Torres Martinez by next day to attend a ceremony, for example.” This was done on foot, of course. Swift scouts could run ahead and race back to report on imminent danger and whether it was safe to travel onward.

Throwing a crafted piece of wood known as a **rabbit stick** at a target is a favorite pastime still pursued today; however, historically, a rabbit stick was used to hunt small game. Target practice helped younger tribal members perfect their aim on their way to becoming skilled hunters. Rabbit sticks, like all traditional tribal game

equipment, were made from natural materials. The Cahuilla used mesquite, oak, or desert willow limbs to fashion the 2-to-3-foot sticks, achieving a final curved shape through heat bending. “They have a range of 75 to 125 feet and rotate just like a boomerang,” Preckwinkle says. “Except a rabbit stick doesn’t come back.”

GAMES OF CHANCE

Tribes throughout Southern California and parts of Arizona played **split stick dice**, also known as **stave games**. Though originally a women’s game, stave is now commonly played by all tribal members. The game requires a flat rock and six sticks

ABOVE: Though originally used to hunt small game, rabbit sticks (which resemble boomerangs) are also thrown at targets as a favorite pastime. **OPPOSITE:** In the coyote game, players must swing the string and get as many acorn caps as possible around the stick, testing their hand-eye coordination.

(or staves) that are flat on one side and rounded on the other. Elderberry, mesquite, or desert willow limbs were typically halved to form the sticks, with a design drawn on the flat side.

Players, in turn, hold the six sticks in a vertical position and drop them simultaneously onto the rock. The goal is for all sticks to clear the rock, with none ending up leaning on another. The sticks’ orientations as they

ETHAN KAMINSKY (RABBIT STICK); KATE ANDERSON (COYOTE)





land earn varying points—or sometimes none at all. A player who earns points gets to go again; a player who earns zero must pass to the player on the left. “It’s a game of elimination and who controls the points,” says Preckwinkle III. “Gain all 12 points and you’re the winner. Games can get very competitive, and sometimes betting is involved.” For the younger set learning the game, some leeway may be granted regarding “leaners” and rock “landers.”

Peon is a traditional hand game that is played by tribes in Southern California and Arizona. It is a game of endurance and strategy. There are eight players and one referee also known as a *koymi*. The game involves participants on two sides who compete by correctly guessing the configuration of bones hidden by the opposing team. Points are awarded to the hiding team for each incorrect guess. The first team to have all 15

point sticks wins.

Peon is a traditional game played by men. Today some tribes will allow women to play in their own tournaments separate from the men, but coed teams do not exist.

The **coyote game** combines elements of skill and chance and was played by Native Americans throughout Southern California (though the materials required to make the game piece indicate it likely originated in the mountains). Twelve acorn caps are threaded on yucca string and tied to a piece of greasewood. Intended to improve hand-eye coordination, the game requires players to swing the string and capture as many acorns as possible on the stick. Best of three determines who can get the most caps, each worth one point. The coyote acorn (angled slightly differently and, therefore, trickier to snare) earns players five points.

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**John R. Preckwinkle III,
Tribal Council Member**

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ABOVE: A group of Cahuilla men gathering to play a sport. **OPPOSITE:** In the traditional game of shinny, players attempt to pass a ball (often made of smooth rock, like the ones shown here) into the opponent’s goal using long, wooden sticks.

SPORTING GAMES

A version of field hockey known as **shinny** was among the most popular Native American games, with Southern California tribes, including the Cahuilla, playing it on land expanses ranging from 100 feet to a mile long. Their sticks were either naturally bent or heat-shaped mesquite, desert willow, or oak, while the ball was a smooth river rock or a gnarled tree root. Interestingly, shinny was primarily played by males among Southern California tribes, but upon crossing the Colorado River into Arizona, it became a female game. “Today, we hold workshops and play occasional games of shinny to keep the tradition alive,” Preckwinkle III says. ●

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY (CAHUILLA MEN); KATE ANDERSON (SHINNY STONES)

