

CHITCUS

A man with a shaved head, wearing a black hoodie and black shorts, is kneeling on a black sand beach. He is holding a long, thin wooden stick horizontally above his head with his right hand. The background shows a blue ocean with white waves crashing onto the shore, and a green, hilly coastline under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The text "INDIAN STICK GAMES" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font.

*INDIAN STICK
GAMES*

Tournaments Where Champions Clash

Rome had gladiators. Asia has martial arts masters. Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest have Indian Stick Game champions, the Olympians of this sport.

For more than a dozen generations, Indian Stick Games have been part of the lives of the Wiyot, Yurok, Karuk, Tolowa, and Hupa peoples of the Klamath, Salmon, Smith River, Eel, and Trinity River regions.

In the warmer months, as the salmon return, host tribes schedule special inter-tribal ceremonies. Families bring out their best regalia, jewelry, and clothing. Afterwards, there is a feast. There may be gambling, playing Indian cards. On special occasions, then there is the Indian Stick Games Tournament. The players are on display until the game is called.

The best Indian Stick Players are held in high esteem by other players, scouts, braves, warriors, veterans, and elders. They are revered as champions for their speed, endurance, and honor.

This is more than sport. The Indian Stick Game is a means to resolve tribal disputes and family fights without battle, and without breaking community or family bonds.

Each game's outcome matters.



Tools of the Game

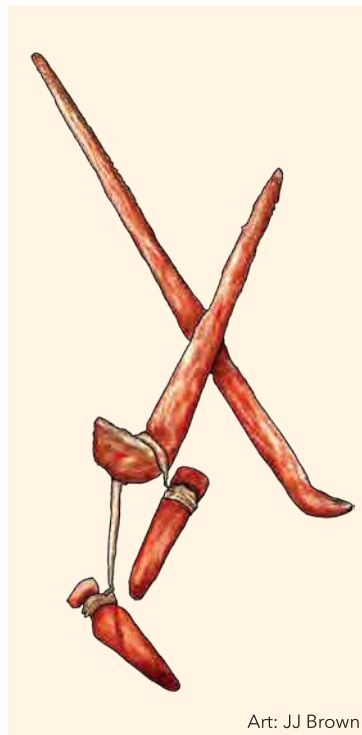
Indian Stick Game tools are few: a stick and a tassel.

Each player holds a stick of Pacific Yew wood. It is about 30" to 36" in length, hand-carved, shaped for balance and control. Yew wood is the strongest wood in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. But it is not easily found now, large stands having been cut away or lost in fires. What remains is taken with care. Alder is also used, chosen for its ease of carving. Stick handles are carved with signature designs to reflect the player and their medicine. Each player makes their mark. The working end is about $\frac{3}{4}$ " across, a tapered bend, shaped for throwing, flicking, or carrying the tassel.

The tassel is made from two segments of wood bound by deer or elk hide. With a single flick, it can travel nearly half the length of the field. The game turns on the movements this small object. A point is scored when the tassel is thrown or carried past the opponent team's goal.

The rules are simple.

- Three games are played.
- One point can be won in each game.
- The team that wins two of the three, wins the series.
- There are NO TIMEOUTS.



Art: JJ Brown

The Battlefield

A typical Stick Games field is wide and open, averaging 100 yards long and 60 yards wide, but they can also be twice that size. They may be by a river bar or sandy area near the water, sometimes a stretch of dirt or turf. The game has no boundaries, no timeouts, no interruptions once play begins.

Teams can field from 7 to 15 players.

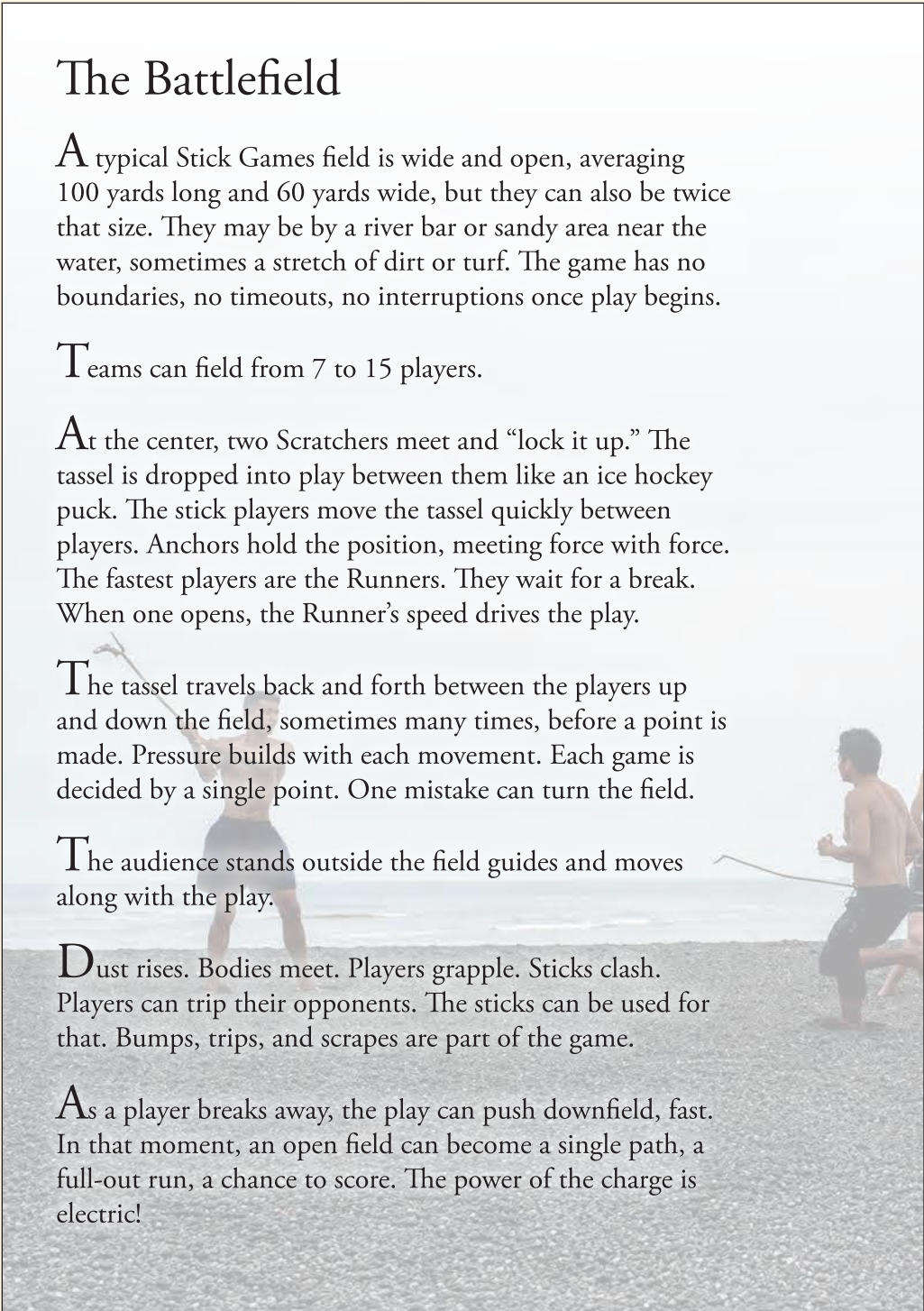
At the center, two Scratchers meet and “lock it up.” The tassel is dropped into play between them like an ice hockey puck. The stick players move the tassel quickly between players. Anchors hold the position, meeting force with force. The fastest players are the Runners. They wait for a break. When one opens, the Runner’s speed drives the play.

The tassel travels back and forth between the players up and down the field, sometimes many times, before a point is made. Pressure builds with each movement. Each game is decided by a single point. One mistake can turn the field.

The audience stands outside the field guides and moves along with the play.

Dust rises. Bodies meet. Players grapple. Sticks clash. Players can trip their opponents. The sticks can be used for that. Bumps, trips, and scrapes are part of the game.

As a player breaks away, the play can push downfield, fast. In that moment, an open field can become a single path, a full-out run, a chance to score. The power of the charge is electric!



The Indian Stick Game warrior sets foot on the battlefield, focused, fleet of foot, strong as a bull elk, tough as sinew, and spiritually prepared to engage his foe. A champion. He is coached by his trainer and counseled by his elders. He has made the necessary sacrifices and is ready.

He has spent Spring and Summer training and purifying his medicine.

He increased his endurance with months of running up and down the riverbed carrying a 35-pound river rock. He has run the mountain deer trails with a rock pebble in his mouth, building up his lungs. Some runs were in sand. He has jabbed the Yew wood stick repeatedly, deep into sand, a thousand times, toughening his forearms and building stamina.

The preparations require sacrifice—pain, injury, and time away from family. All who play understand this work. Your sacrifice is recognized by the elders, your trainer, and your peers. You train. Your physical body is molded through your individual commitment to win.

Strengthening spirit and medicine is central to the training. The player fasts and attends sweats for purification. He offers prayers. He seeks Creator's direction. Purifying his medicine can win the day! Up-river players fast from one to three days, reflecting and praying at a sacred riverside rock above *Ishi Pish* Falls. They attend sweats, all to build their medicine and power.

Knowing their medicine, is knowing their strength. It is the power that allows players to prevail, overcome their opponent, and achieve victory. Their medicine, endurance and strength are the means necessary for victory.

Ancient Ones watch the players in awe. The players' moves light up the elders' eyes. The family cheers. Beyond the acclaim, each player's creed is reflected in the way he stands, in how he meets his opponent, and in how he answers the moment. He knows who he is and what he brings to the field. He knows he's a champion and he respects his opponent as a champion.

The creed is simple, and it carries weight. The player owns the lock-up, the breakaway, the point. He plays for his team, his family, his tribe, and for his place within this heritage.

I will score.

I will take away your medicine.

I will assist my teammate.

We will win together.

One point at a time the game is won. The strength of an Indian Stick Player's creed is proven, not in speech, but in action.

Ultimately, there waits the honor tattoo of the Tournament Champion!



Looking back, I did not realize my Grandfather was getting my mind ready for the Indian Stick Games.

We lived by the emerald-green waters of the Salmon River near the Marble Mountains of the Upper Klamath.

I watched him carve a long Indian Stick, mesmerized. The Yew wood was hard, strong as the boulders of *lshi Pish* Falls. He cut Indian designs into it. The handle fit one's hands. The tip pointed outward to snatch up the tassel and toss it downfield for the winning point!

I would have to be fleet-footed, strong as a bull elk, fast as a salmon scared out of a dipping hole. I'd need a reserve of strength to overcome any challenge from my opponent.

It was Grandpa Shan's intention to introduce his grandson to the spiritual world of the Up-River People. Here everything revolved around the World Renewal Ceremonies held each year at the Dark of the Moon by the *Karuk Au'da*. Most important is knowing where your Center of Earth originated. In my case, it was *Kottomein*.

Grandpa Shan was getting Old. His pocketknife grew dull from its long service of carving, cleaning salmon, sturgeon, deer and elk.

Grandpa Shan got me ready for the challenges in life that I would be facing as a young warrior from *Kottomein*.



Chitcus,
Karuk Tribal
Medicine Man



Matt R., Zack and Terry Brown. Indian Stick Games champions. A family tradition.



J.J. and Jordie Brown. A new generation of players.

Follow the smoke of the sacred fires of the medicine man!