

The Ojibway Moccasin Game

The information contained in this booklet is the Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation understanding of the Moccasin Game. Many of the elders of Roseau River spent a great deal of time teaching the game to the young people. The game was revived in Roseau in the 70s and 80s after two decades of no one playing it.

Many of the elders who taught us the game have since gone on into the spirit world including Stanley Nelson, Herman Atkinson, Frank Edwards, Leo Hayden Roy Johnson, Bill Thomas, Paul Hayden, and Harry Roberts. Other elders such as Lawrence Antoine, Gabe Hayden, John Hayden, Eddy Smith, Alfred Johnson, etc. still teach and play the game with the younger people.

We owe all these elders a debt of gratitude for their knowledge and willingness to take the time to teach. The Moccasin Game had been lost in many Ojibway communities and this is a game that had many other purposes besides being a fun social event. A great deal of psychology is involved and playing the game teaches the players as they interact with the other players.

The Ojibway Moccasin Game is a man's game. Traditionally, only men were allowed to play the game. Other gambling games were strictly for women. This allowed women to be with other women in a social setting. The separation of the games led to time for men to be alone, and to have the time to teach the young men to be men.

When the elders first re-introduced the Moccasin Game to the community, the first thing we noticed was that we had a setting where the youth could come in regular contact with their elders.

A generation gap that existed because we had taken on the values of white society disappeared with the Moccasin Game re-introduction. We could laugh with our uncles, grandfathers, and fathers. We could compete and there were definite rules of order and conduct subtly introduced to the young people.

There is a rule that no one is allowed to lay down during the game. The elders strictly enforced this rule, there is no fooling around, there has to be respect for the players and for the game itself. It taught us to lose with dignity, a handshake after every game and to win with as little teasing as possible among Ojibways.

Roseau River has over sixty players who know and understand the game. If you can pick up some understanding of the game then this booklet is worth the effort. The game must be played in order to understand it. This booklet only explains a few of the details. The last section of this booklet comes from a research paper by Dr. Kathy Avery Kinew on gaming. This will give the reader some background on the Moccasin Game from the point of view of a researcher.

Me-gwetch

Mush-ko-dah-be-shik-eese

Terrence Nelson

Equipment Requirements

Now a days, the game is played tournament style not as in the old days when there was much more time and people could play for weeks. The version of the game in this booklet is the tournament style with nine soldier limits to each game.

The game is now played on a flat surface perhaps on gym mats or a four by eight foot 3/8" to 1/2" plywood sheet covered with outdoor carpet and a blanket taped down to provide a smooth surface. See the picture in Kinew's research paper for the positioning of the two teams.

The teams face each other over the playing surface about six feet away from each other. A team requires an absolute minimum of two in order to play. A team can have as many players as it wants; however, in order to give a chance to every team member to play in a tournament, it is usual to have no more than five members per team.

The game origins are shrouded in legends and stories but the reason that four moccasins are used is simple. A game could be played by four people who simply took off their moccasins to use as the hiding mats unless, of course, you had a one legged man. You should end up with eight moccasins, four to each side.

The game equipment was practical, nothing extra needed to be carried about. On the trail or in the village everything you needed to play was available. There was very little need to make efforts to get a game going.

Today, a well equipped team will require the following

- At least 2 sets of 4 marbles, three of them the same, and one different
- Or you can use steel bearings, one of which is marked. Some prefer using bearings because they don't have to look at them as they hide, they can feel the marked bearing as it is hidden.
- Previously they would use bullets or even round stones on the shore
- Four Moccasin pads, these can be heavy cloth sewn to about 8 inches by 12 inches, larger or smaller depending on the preference of the player or if the poor guy has no one to sew him a set, he can buy cloth table place mats. In any case, we no longer use real moccasins.
- A long stick about 4 feet long or longer to open the moccasin game pads. Despite the fact that the bush is full of sticks, you still get some teams trying to borrow the other teams "striking stick". The striking stick shouldn't be a big thick club, a light willow will do or some guys will get fancy and use cut fishing poles that are taped in various colors.
- 20 counting sticks about 12 inches long. 1/4 inch dowels work the best. They are available at any lumber yard. You can paint them if you want.
- 9 "soldiers" about 4 inches long, 4 one color, 4 another color, and one odd. These are also dowels usually a little thicker than the counting sticks.

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- A hand drum, drum stick and a really good singer or two.

Level One of the Ojibway Moccasin Game

The Ojibway Moccasin Game is divided into two levels of play. The first level is usually very short and is used to determine the placement of the high and low moccasin game pads to be used in the second level of play.

The tournament game starts off with the flip of a coin to determine which team gets to hide first. The hider sits in the corner of his team with four moccasin game pads squarely in front of him. He hides one of the four marbles or steel bearings in each of the moccasin game pads. The hider has a choice of what he uses, either bearings or marbles. For the purpose of clarity and space, in the rest of the explanation we will use the term marked bearings and no longer refer to the use of marbles.

Prior to the hider beginning to hide the marked bearing, one or more of the team members starts singing. Only the team who is hiding has the right to be singing. The hunting team is not allowed to sing at all. Following the hiding of the bearings, the hider sits back and awaits the hunter to begin. Only one person on the hunting team should be holding the striking stick. Two can be holding striking sticks but there must be only one designated striker.

In order for any other member of the hunting team to strike the moccasin game pads, the designated hunter must be in agreement to allow the other team members to strike. If a team member breaches this rule, the hiding team may, in the opinion of the judge, be awarded whatever points would have been earned had the hider successfully eluded the hunter.

The hunting team, the ones who must find the hider, gets twenty counting sticks. These sticks do not belong to either team at this point. It is only as the hider successfully hides the marked bearing that the hiding team begins to get earned sticks from the hunting team. When the hiding team is found, they also use the remaining unearned sticks.

For example, the hiding team successfully earned eight sticks, then were found, they would have eight sticks plus the 12 unearned sticks, and as they are now the hunting team they begin paying out of the 12 unearned sticks before they have to move towards using their eight earned sticks.

If they find the other team quickly say for example, using up only 3 unearned sticks, they keep their eight earned sticks on their side, the other team gets 3 earned sticks and they now are passed back the remaining nine unearned sticks to begin paying out of the 9 before they have to pay out of the 3 earned sticks they now have.

When the hunting team successfully finds the hider, they pass all the unearned counting sticks to the other team and they now begin their chance at earning the 20 long sticks. Once all the uncounted sticks have been earned, the hunting team must use their earned sticks in order not to lose a soldier.

Once a hiding team earns all twenty of the long counting sticks they then trade them in for, a soldier, one of the nine small sticks placed in between the teams at the side of the playing area. Essentially a soldier is a game point, once you win five of the nine game points you win the match. When the twenty sticks are traded in for a soldier, then all twenty counting sticks again become uncounted or unearned, they don't belong to either team.

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In a tournament, the first team to successfully trade in 20 earned sticks 5 times wins the match. In order to win the entire tournament the winning teams must successfully win many matches against various teams. In tournaments, once a game point (soldier) is earned it cannot be won back by the other team. The 20 long sticks, the counting sticks; however, can be won back and forth. A game point, the soldier, can be hard to win if the 20 long sticks keep being won and lost as each team successfully finds the hider. Some tournament matches were known to go for up to 6 hours as evenly matched teams successfully find each other.

Level one play usually does not last long. At level one, there is only one person who is hunting the hider. In level two play the hunting team has a "guard" and a "striker" (the hunter), both of whom are hunting the hider. In level one play, the values of the moccasin pads are 4, 3, 2, or 0 depending on whether or not the hunter has successfully turned over, (exposed) a moccasin game pad not holding the marked bearing, and/or striking the right pad.

In level two, the count becomes much more complicated, it can be 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 or 0. In either level, the team to earn sticks is the hiding team. The only exception to this rule is if the hider forgets where he hid the marked bearing. In the Ojibway Moccasin Game the hider must know at all times where he hid the marked bearing. This makes the game really interesting because the hider must be able to hide his emotions or deliberately mislead the hunters. Ever hear of reverse psychology? Ojibways invented it.

The hunter may immediately strike the moccasin game pad he believes contains the marked bearing or he may begin by turning over a pad he believes does not contain the marked bearing. Striking the pad is a clear signal that the hunter believes the marked bearing is contained in the struck moccasin game pad.

If you successfully turn over one of the pads not containing the marked bearing then the hider must have placed the marked bearing in one of the three remaining pads.

If the hunter again successfully turns over one of the 3 remaining moccasin game pads not containing the marked bearing, then it now becomes a 50/50 chance that the hunter will strike the right one.

While a person can play the percentages, the real test is the hider sitting there with two moccasin game pads and deliberately outfoxing the hunter. This is the true test of a person's hiding skills. Men with long marriage histories usually hide pretty good.

Once the hunter has successfully turned over one of the 4 moccasins game pads without exposing the marked bearing the value of the other moccasin game pads drop. In level one play, if the hunter does open up a moccasin game pad where the marked bearing is hidden on the first try, it will cost him 4 of the 20 long counting sticks.

If he successfully strikes the marked bearing it costs him 0 long sticks. If he opens the pad containing the marked bearing on his second open, he loses 2 long sticks.

Level two play, is determined by the hunter completely missing the hider. If the hunter opens a moccasin game pad where the marked bearing is not and then strikes one of the other two pads not containing the marked bearing, that is considered a complete miss, signaling the start of the level two play. In this case the hunter would pay 3 long sticks as opposed to 2 long sticks as this is the signal that level two play has begun.

A complete miss is even more complicated by the fact that if the hunter opens one pad successfully and then opens a second pad, uncovering the marked bearing in his second try that is not considered a complete miss.

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He will pay 2 sticks instead of 3. If the hunter opens a pad on his first try uncovering the marked bearing, he pays 4 sticks that is not considered a complete miss.

If the hunter strikes immediately, missing the marked bearing, he has to open another moccasin game pad. If he again misses the marked bearing, that is considered a complete miss, he pays 3 sticks signaling second level play. If he uncovers the marked bearing after he has already struck, that is not a complete miss, he pays 4 sticks and continues level one play.

Level Two Play

The best way to learn how to play the game is from the point of view of the hunter and his team. The hunting team is the ones who pay out the sticks and have to work as a team in finding the hider.

In level two play, there are now two hunters, the first is the person holding the 4 steel bearings in his hand. I'll call him the guard. He places one bearing between each of his fingers. If you look at your hand, palm towards you, there are 4 spaces between your fingers. These spaces can correspond to the 4 mats in front of the hider.

Once the hider had finished hiding, the guard puts one bearing in each of the spaces between his fingers. UB tournament play, the guard is required to push the bearings down into the spaces so that the bearings cannot be easily moved, his hand must be closed and stay closed until he either misses or finds the hider.

When the guard is ready he holds his closed hand out, (knuckles down) signaling the striker to begin. He opens his hand when he has either missed the hider or if he has successfully found him. If he moves his hand or waves it, he is signaling that he is out of the play.

The purpose of the guard is to ensure, as much as possible that his team does not have to pay out eight long sticks. The guard normally "stays home" meaning that there is a predetermined moccasin game pad that the guard is supposed to be at most of the time.

The guard is not forced to stay home and can go to the other moccasin game pads anytime he believes he knows where it is. This makes the game interesting because *the striker* (the other hunter) the one using the long 4 foot stick, never really knows whether or not the guard is where he should be.

The striker **is not allowed to talk to the guard during the play.** A hunting team that tries to cheat usually does so by coordinating the guard and striker to open up in other than the pre-determined eight pads. There can be no communication between the guard and the striker because the moccasin game pad where they are to open up from can shift according to where the hider hid in his last turn. When a guard does his job right, the striker can count him to be home, **most of the time.**

If the hider has hidden in the eight and the hunter opens up there, the guard being at home, the hunting team will pay only 4 sticks and will win the right to hide. If the guard is constantly out hunting, the hider will start placing the marked bearing in the eight and the hunting team will start losing the game.

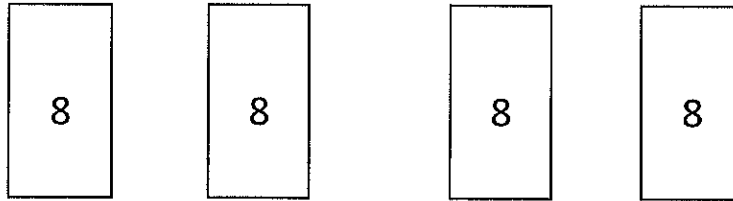
The counting system really makes sense; it is very logical and calculated. The Moccasin Game survived because of the interaction of the players, the psychology involved, and the skills needed to win. It is not a game of simple percentages. It takes real skill and knowledge of human behavior.

The reason that the rule exists, that the hider must at all times know where he had hid the marked bearing is the pressure that it puts the hider under. The elders say that everyone who hides gives away the knowledge of where he hid, it is just a matter of figuring it out, just what mannerism, body language, he is secretly projecting.

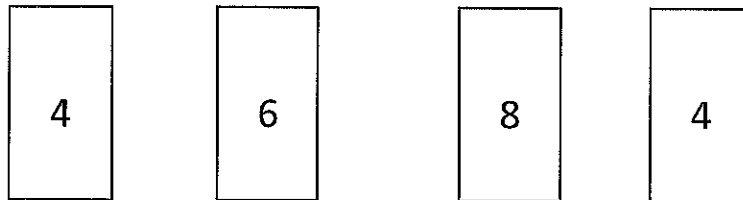
The moccasin Game can be a good psychological teaching tool. The game requires concentration, if a person gets mad; it's very likely that his team will lose.

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All the moccasin game pads are worth eight before one of them is opened.

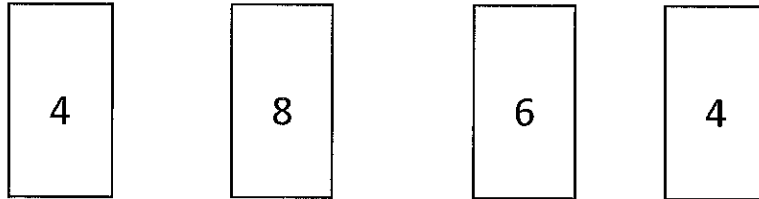


If the hider had hidden in one of the two right side moccasin game pads #3 or #4, then the next time the pads will be as follows,



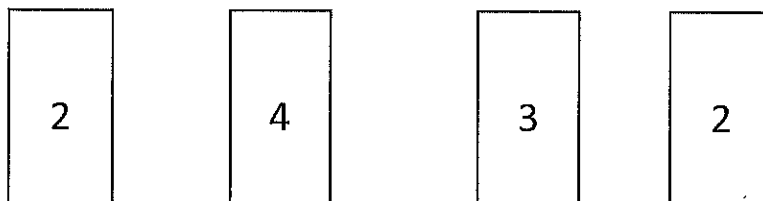
Again this is true, once a moccasin game pad had been successfully turned over without revealing the marked bearing, otherwise all are eight.

If in the next hide the hider had put the marked bearing in either #1 or #2, in the left side, then in his next hide the count will look as follows



Without talking to each other the guard and striker should automatically assume that the guard will be "at home" in the eight and the eight is where the striker is supposed to open up from. The striker does not usually open any old place.

If only one of the hunters either the guard and striker hits the right pad containing the marked bearing then the pay is



If both the striker and guard hit the right pad, then the pay is 0 and the hunting team gets a double chance to hide. The other team now has to find them twice in order to get back the right to hide. Any members of the hunting team may signal a double, by pointing two fingers at the hiding team. If the designated striker agrees to allow him to proceed, (having confidence in the doublers' judgment), then the person doubling takes both the striker and the guard's chance.

If he succeeds, he wins his team double chance of hiding (or if the other team has a double, he evened the score), and does not have to pay any sticks to the hiding team. The danger of course is that he is on his own, there is no guard and he could cost his team eight sticks. During a game, an object (any object, a pack of cigarettes, lighter cap etc.) is placed on the side of the playing surface to signify that the hiding team has a double at a time. Once the hunting team had found the hiding team and once the object is removed from the playing area.

No team can double with less than 4 sticks. If for example, a person has only 3, 2 or 1 earned or unearned sticks left, then only the striker is allowed to hunt, the guard is out of the play. The only exception is if the guard for example, 1 uncounted stick and 2 earned sticks, the uncounted counts for half and the 2 earned sticks count for the other half. In that case the hunting team can still use a guard and a striker or they can double.

3 long sticks is where the count can get tricky. When a person has 3 sticks left, the pads drop in worth to 4, 4, 4, and 4. When one is successfully opened, without uncovering the marked bearing, then the value would be 2, 3, 3 and 2, or in the case of the highs being on the outside, 3, 2, 2, and 3.

A person who opens up a 3 successfully, then misses on one of the 2's, will pay only 2 sticks, leaving him 1 stick left for the next round of hiding. Of course, this makes hiding and hunting very interesting. Where would you hide if the person hunting had 3 sticks left? Remember if the hunter begins by opening up in one of the 2's, and the marked bearing is there, he loses all 3 because the pads are all worth 4, 4, 4 and 4, before a moccasin game pad is successfully opened. If a person has 2 sticks left and strikes the hider's marked bearing, there is no payment of the long sticks. If only 1 stick is left, the same applies; there is no payment if the hunter is successful in finding the marked bearing. Of course there is no guard when one has only 1 or 2 or 3 long sticks left.

When the hunting team has only 4 long sticks left, you have a situation where the guard will be hunted and the striker will open up from any one of the 4 moccasin game pads. The reason being, is that if the guard just simply stayed home and the striker opened up from the eight, the hider could win a soldier by simply putting the marked bearing in the eight.

Remember on a first open if a guard is not there, you lose eight, if the guard is there and you opened up there you still lose 4. You win the right to hide but you lose a soldier in the process. If you have only 4 and both the guard and striker missed on the first open, you lose eight, you lose the other 4 from the next soldier round. The hiding team will have won a soldier plus 4 earned sticks in the next round.

If you come into a place where a game is in progress, you can see who is winning by counting how many soldiers each side has. To make sense of the game, you have to ask where the highs are for each side. You can then see the pattern of how the striker and guard work together to open up the moccasin game pads.

The game is complex, complicated, but brilliant in its structure of counting and winning points. The game is thousands of years old. The only way to really understand the game is to play it, and begin to understand the counting system from the point of view of the striker. The striker is the one who holds the counting sticks and pays

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out. Being the striker allows a person to begin to understand the reasoning behind how the counting system came into place.

A Short Review

- 8 long sticks if both the guard and striker miss on the first open
- 7 in the event of paying eight, you only have seven left, that's all you pay
- 6 long sticks if the marked bearing is in the opposite high and missed after a pad had been opened
- 5 is all you pay if that is all the uncounted sticks there are or if that is all the earned sticks you have if you missed the marked bearing in an eight or six
- 4 long sticks if it is missed in one of the lows after opening a moccasin pad
- 4 long sticks if on the first open, it is there and the guard had it there
- 3 if on the second, third or fourth open or strike, only the guard or the striker has it covered and the marked bearing is in the other high pad
- 2 if only one of the hunters had it covered in the low pads, after an open
- 1 if after an open one of the hunters has it covered
- 0 if both hunters are correct, or if the person correctly doubles

In the event of paying out eight sticks, you had 1 uncounted stick and several earned sticks, you use the one as half payment (4) and you have to cover the other half with 4 sticks of your earned sticks so actually you only pay five sticks for an eight. If you had three earned sticks left you would pay only the one plus the three but of course in that event you lost a soldier.

Whatever you lose, you have to pay for the guard's chance and the striker's chance. If you missed it in 4 and only the striker has it, you still have to pay for the guard's miss which is half, or 2. If you missed it in an eight and only the guard had it, you still have to pay for the striker's miss which is half, or 4. If you missed it in a six and only the striker has it, you still have to pay for the guard's miss which is half, or????? The answer is 3.

If you had 5 uncounted sticks left and some earned sticks and you missed it in the eight or six, half of that is 4 which is either the guard's or striker's payment and the other 1 stick covers the other payment. You do not have to pay any more than that from your earned sticks.

This can be done in lower payments also. For example if you had one uncounted stick and 12 earned sticks and the hider hid in the eight, the striker opened up in the eight and the guard was home. You pay only the uncounted stick because it counts for half, the payment for the striker's miss. The guard pays nothing because he hit it.

Simply put, you pay nothing for a hit, but because you have 2 hunters and one miss you pay half of whatever the pad was worth. Half can be less than half the value if that's all that's left of the unearned, uncounted sticks. Only playing the game itself and paying out of different situations will make sense of the complex Ojibway Moccasin Game.

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