How to Run a Dene Games Competition

Introduction

Traditional Dene Games were first introduced at the Arctic Winter Games in 1990. Since then, the games played have been Stick Pull, Finger Pull, Pole Push, Snow Snake, and Hand Games. Each of these games represents a traditional activity developed to improve strength and endurance and to increase skill and agility; all traits needed for survival on the land. The games were also used to strengthen family and community bonds. It is the tradition of strengthening community bonds that makes the Dene Games particularly suited to the Arctic Winter Games.

A unique aspect of Dene Games is that coaches and athletes provide technical advice and encouragement to their rivals during competition. Spectators witnessing this for the first time are often amazed at the sportsmanship and camaraderie shown by coaches and competitors. In fact, a positive collective goal of the Dene Games is to maintain traditions of sharing and to help other athletes achieve their best possible results.

This manual was developed to assist Host Societies in preparing for and managing Dene Games competitions that provide great experiences for athletes and coaches, as well as for spectators and the media. It will describe the venues, equipment, officials and competition formats to assist organizers in ensuring events run smoothly. The manual will help organizers plan events thoroughly so they can be run safely and efficiently. This guide is to be used in conjunction with the approved Technical Package for Dene Games and the Arctic Winter Games Staging Manual.
Venues/Facilities

Dene Games require both indoor and outdoor venues. Stick Pull, Finger Pull, and Hand Games are all played indoors, while Snow Snake and Pole Push are played outdoors. Whether the event is held indoors or outdoors, every effort is to be made to ensure that spectators and the media are seated as close to the action as possible to enhance the friendly and intimate feel between them and the participants. For all events, participant and spectator safety must always be a primary consideration in event setup.

Indoor

Gymnasiums or community halls are ideal venues for Stick Pull, Finger Pull, and Hand Games. As some games require participants to be seated on the floor, facilities with cold cement floors should be avoided. Wooden floors are ideal for both comfort and safety.

Spectator and media seating in the facility should, if possible, allow for seating/standing around the participants. Bleacher style seating may be added to to provide more people with better views of the action. While ensuring room for the participants/spectators on the floor below, bleachers should be as close to the action as possible.

Outdoor

Large open and snow-covered spaces are required for the Snow Snake and Pole Push games. The field of play for each should be level and well packed.

Equipment

Each Dene Game requires sport-specific equipment. Equipment is described in the Dene Games Technical Package.
Officials

Unlike many other events, a certification system is not in place for developing officials for Dene Games. Officials are individuals who have been involved in the games for a significant period of time. These officials are often former athletes or coaches who have gained knowledge on how to officiate from elders who pass along traditional knowledge about the activities.

Successful events cannot be run without expert officials. There are 4 categories of officials in Dene Games.

Head Official - A head official shall be appointed to oversee all competitions at each venue. The head official shall enforce the rules of each competition and rule on any disputes.

Judges – Six (6) or more judges may be appointed to oversee the competitions (dependent on competition format and number of competitors). Judges monitor play, measure results and enforce the rules of each competition and advise the head official on any disputes.

Judges and the head official are only to offer advice to athletes and coaches in the interpretation of the rules and are not to provide instruction or other forms of advice.

Scorekeeper\Results official  Records and tracks the competition results for each event. Training, including the use of GEMS (Games Event Management System
approved for Arctic Winter Games) must be provided to scorekeepers prior to the Games to ensure a clear understanding of each event.

**Master of Ceremonies**

The Dene Games Master of Ceremonies (MC) is a combined teacher, historian, storyteller and entertainer, and plays a significant role at the Dene Games venue.

The MC is an information provider who speaks to the spectators about the athletes, and conveys the nature of friendship and sharing of the games. The MC has a good understanding of Dene Games and their protocol. He or she is mindful of each competitor’s need to focus, and tailors commentary to rally the athletes and the spectators in the spirit of fun and celebration. The MC explains the proceedings to the audience in a way that clarifies the intricacies of each game, and provides spectators, many unfamiliar with the games, with the historical beginnings of each event. The MC assists with medal presentations, ensuring that they are carried out in an appropriate manner.

The MC must place special emphasis on learning the correct pronunciation of athletes’ names in an effort to ensure all athletes feel welcome and respected.

**Festivities (Optional)**

Although deemed optional, organizers may wish to include festivities in the Dene Games to add fanfare, energy, and spirit to the games.

a) Opening ceremonies are a good way to have all officials, competitors, and volunteers come together to meet one another and launch a great experience for
all involved in Dene Games. An opening ceremony should be held just prior to the first event.

b) A feast is a cultural tradition that may be held to honor the officials, players, coaches and volunteers. It may be held during the week of competition as an opportunity for all officials, competitors, and volunteers to join together in celebration of the Dene Games.

**General Note:** Organizers are advised to identify extra volunteers to assist at every venue. Support for media and spectator greeting and marshaling goes a long way to ensure a successful competition. Assistance with opening ceremonies and with the feast, particularly with cooking and cleanup, are important. Out of respect for the Games hosts and in the spirit of the Games themselves, all participants and volunteers are encouraged to leave the venue clean and in good condition for others. Dene Games are fun, and additional volunteers are encouraged to take a role and enjoy the experience.

**Stick Pull**

**Background**

In the spring, with rivers reopening and water beginning to flow, Dene families would use gaps carved in the ice by the current to grab fish with their bare hands. While fish could be guided into the open areas using objects placed in the water, the greatest challenge was grasping the fish and throwing them onto the ice and snow. The same challenge faced those striving to proficiently remove fish from the nets. The Stick Pull was created to practice fish handling techniques.

Throughout the winter, either inside or out, playing Stick Pull provided practice for the grip, strength, and pulling techniques useful for grabbing slippery fish and pulling
them back and out of the water. This had to be done with a grip hard enough to hold them, but not so hard as to squeeze them out of one’s grip. The action had to be quick and smooth to bring success. Stick Pull provided a fun and challenging way to develop and maintain a skill that contributed to family survival.

Event Description

Stick Pull is played as an individual event. While traditional grease for the game was bear grease, the current general-purpose grease used is Crisco. No other product will do. Tissues or towels must be kept on hand for players and officials to use for cleanup. See Technical Package for detailed rules.

Competition Format

It is recommended that there be two matches running at the same time. See Technical Package for detailed rules.

Officials Required (Minimum 6 – 3 for each competitive circle):

- Judge: Chief official for the Stick Pull competition. The judge usually is the stick greaser and places the stick in the competitors hands.
- An official to operate a stop watch for timing players (see Technical Package rules).
- An official to watch for competitor body movement.

Finger Pull

Background

 Practiced in camp in all seasons, the Finger Pull strengthened the participant’s fingers and increased his or her pain tolerance for very practical purposes. To tan moose
and caribou hides, women worked hard to stretch the hides on racks. Stretching hide required cutting holes around the edge of the hide through which babiche was used to tie the hide to a frame. To pull the hide tight for stretching, the women would insert their fingers in the holes and pull hard while the babiche was tied securely to the frame. The pulling action with the finger had to be smooth and consistent to avoid tearing the hide and opening the hole. Superior finger strength was invaluable in successful tanning.

Strong fingers were also required for carrying fish to camp. All people, but especially women, carried fish from the water’s edge to camp. The easiest way to carry as many fish as possible in one trip was to hook the fingers through the fishes’ gills. Those with the strongest fingers, who could tolerate the discomfort of additional weight, could carry the most fish, completing the task efficiently. Of course it wasn’t just for hide tanning and fishing that people needed strong hands and fingers. Life in the bush required people to be fit in all ways.

**Event Description**

Two sitting players lock middle fingers, the objective of the offensive player is to break the other player’s finger lock or to pull the defensive player’s arm forward.

**Competition Format**

It is recommended that there be two matches running at the same time.

See Technical Package for detailed rules.

**Equipment Required**

See Technical Package.
Officials Required (Minimum 6 – 3 for each competitive circle):

- Judge: The chief official for the Finger Pull competition, monitors the defensive players elbow movement and monitors any body movement that might be displayed by participants.
- One official to set up the participants in the correct starting positions and to monitor the fingers, hands, and wrists of the players.
- One official to operate a stopwatch for timing.

Snow Snake

Background

The Snow Snake, originated by throwing a spear along the surface of the snow while caribou, seal, or ptarmigan hunting. Hunting in winter was not an easy task when people had to sneak close to prey in order to make the kill. Finding the prey lying down in the snow, skilled Dene hunters would quietly approach the prey and, from a distance of up to several hundred feet, throw the spear, or snow snake, along the surface of the snow with great force and accuracy into the side of the sleeping animal.

Snow Snake might well be considered a game of power but most importantly it is about the technique of throwing the spear with accuracy. Hunters would practice throwing the spear throughout the winter using lakes covered with ice and snow.

Event Description

See Technical Package for details
Venue/Facilities

Spectator viewing is permitted along the length of the track but they must be kept back a minimum of 6 metres (approx. 20 ft.) for safety, as sometimes an overthrown spear will leave the track.

Equipment Required

Equipment is detailed in Technical Package. It is advisable to have 1 additional snow snake on hand in the event that damage occurs to the competition snow snake. Other equipment required:

- A tape measure (to measure distance of snow snake travel)
- A broom (to be used to keep the run-up area clear)
- Spray paint (to mark boundaries and pre-measured lines on the track)
- A canvas tent with wood stove heater for warming competitors.

Competition Format

See Technical Package for detailed rules

Officials (Minimum 6 – three for each track):

- Judge: Chief official for Snow Snake, the judge will make all official rulings as required. The judge usually remains in the run-up area and observes whether the competitor crosses the throw line or not and will keep the run-up area in good shape for competitor.
- One assistant will be positioned down the track and is responsible for measuring the distance travelled by the snow snake.
- One assistant will be the scorekeeper, responsible for recording the distance of all throws and all non-scoring throws.
Pole Push

Background

Camp life placed great demands on people, everyone needing to be strong and able to work for long periods of time without tiring. During the summer, the Dene were often on the move, carrying with them camp equipment and supplies. Canoes needed to be loaded and unloaded and camps set up and taken down. Travel by canoe involved many portages, from the very short to the very long, all requiring strength and endurance to get canoes, equipment and supplies over to the next body of water. There was no time of year that people could let their strength and endurance diminish. A winter game, Pole Push was played to increase and maintain strength and endurance. While it was primarily a game played by men, women were welcome to play as well, recognition that the strength of all people was important to the group.

Event Description

Two teams of 4 players each grasp the ends of a spruce or pine pole and attempt to push each other out of a marked circle. See Technical Package for detailed rules.

Venue/Facilities

Pole Push is played outdoors on a level snow-covered surface. Spectators should be encouraged to surround the playing area although a lane should be left for participant entrance and exit.
Competition Format

Safety in this event is very important. Athletes can be injured when poles are dropped or by friction burns from the pole. The Host Society is advised to have advanced first aiders on site. See Technical Package for detailed rules.

Equipment Required

See Technical Package

Officials Required (Minimum 3):

- Judge: Chief official for the Pole Push competition, the judge will enforce the rules, determine when a team has been pushed out of bounds and declare the round over.
- Scorekeeper: The official who records the outcomes of each round.
- Assistant: Required to ensure that the area of play remains clearly marked and that spectators are kept back from and don’t interfere with the competition.

Hand Games

Background

Clearly the most complex of the Dene Games, Hand Games were played for pleasure and celebration when families came together on the trail or met at annual rendezvous sites. Hand Games were often played at the conclusion of successful hunts following the sharing of the kill and feasting. After the work was done, it was time to play.
Hand Games originated with a simple system of hand signals that have evolved to today’s version of the game that includes very complex signals requiring careful attention to detail. Hand Games can be completed very quickly or with skilled players carry on for many hours but always for fun and entertainment and always meant to bring people closer together.

**Event Description**

Two teams of equal numbers kneel on the floor opposite each other. Hiding their hands beneath a blanket, between their thighs, or behind their backs, each member of the playing team shuffles a token from fist to fist while drummers and singers drum and chant to increase the intensity of the game.

**Venue/Facilities**

Hand Games is played indoors. No special playing area is required except that teams must have sufficient room to play unencumbered by other teams or spectators. A tarp or mat is spread on the floor for the teams to play on.

Spectators and press are encouraged to be close to the competition but the competition area must be clearly defined to provide 3 to 3.5 metres (10 to 12 feet) of space between the players and the spectators in smaller venues and approximately 6 metres (about 20 feet) for larger venues. This ensures sufficient room for players, drummers, and officials as well as sufficient open space for spectators to be able to see. A bleacher setting is best suited for the Hand Games ensuring that everyone has a good view of the field of play. If bleachers are not available, an area for people to sit on the floor should be provided in front of chairs for other spectators.
Competition Format

It is recommended that there be two matches running at the same time.
See Technical Package for detailed rules

Equipment Required

- Traditional drums and a minimum of 4 drummers per match.
- A heat source for continual tuning of the drums throughout the competition.
- A tarp large enough for the teams to play on.
- One small object per player.
- 24 small sticks 2.5 cm. (approx. 1”) in length - Local tradition shall be observed in the stick design. It is recommended to have an additional set of sticks on hand in the event of stick loss.
- Players may use a blanket, a jacket, or something similar to cover their hands while shuffling the object.

Officials Required (Minimum of 3 for each competitive circle):

- Judge: Chief official for the Hand Games competition. The judge makes all rulings on hand signals.
- Assistant (2): The assistants will watch for any infractions by the players. One of whom will keep score of the match.
Stick Pull and Finger Pull - Recommended Indoor Venue Layout

- Bleachers
- Judges as appropriate
- Roped off area
- Competition Areas
- Judges as appropriate

- Athlete & Coach rest area
- Athlete support Services
Pole Push - Outdoor Venue

Spectators

Roped Off

Competition area

Athlete's rest area
First Aid Staff
Officials

Spectators

Spectators

Spectators
Dene Games - Snow Snake Recommended Venue Layout

- Officials support
- Athlete run up area
- Officials as appropriate
- Athlete run up area
- Athlete rest
- Athlete support

Spectators

- Safety
- Trench (two if possible)
- Ropes

Spectators