



Sports Day

In the summer term there are many time honoured traditions which happen every year in schools around the country. There are tests which are timed just right to fall on the first day of decent weather, dramatic productions where young thespians inflict their singing and acting talents on the community and practice the age old art of the artiste's sob and tantrum, and then there is Sports Day.

The first school sports day can be traced back to the Stone Age, some 35 thousand years ago. The events were very different at this time. Spear throwing was a popular event and the participants often honed their skills for weeks in advance, using some of the local wildlife as target practice, especially slow moving rodents which could be found in the forests and fields around their encampment. Experts believe this is the origins of the phrase 'holey moley'.

The novelty event has been dated to 28 thousand years ago. A cave in the west of modern day Romania has yielded a collection of small bags filled with beans and thin burnt tree branches which had been shaped into rings. More evidence comes from a new Pleistocene site dating back to 12 thousand years ago. Leather straps measuring over a metre in length have been found alongside primitive cave art depicting humans trying to pin a tail on a mammoth. The lead archaeologist, Prof. Luke Indahol said, "Approaching any of the large mammals of this time would be a perilous task indeed. The figures in the artwork seem to be children." The professor stated that the activity may have been a ritual to test skill and endurance and initiate young people into adulthood. He could not comment whether figures were wearing blindfolds or not, and further analysis and computer processing of the image would be necessary.

The Greeks are famed for starting the Olympic Games and the Greeks began the first organised and competitive school sports days. In the ancient Greek world boys and girls were usually educated separately and school sports were no exception. The ancient Greeks invented many of the sports we have today. The writing of Skibbler the Chronicler tells us that in 2,032 BC on the island of Milo, a school sports days was coming to a close and dinner was being prepared on an open fire.

"The plates were far too close to the flames and they were getting hot. Dis of Gutonia, a mountain of a boy, tried to seek a plate from the scalding hot pile. In a moment he shouted out an unrepeatable curse in the name of Zeus, cried out for his mother and threw the plate across the field and hit and broke the statue of Venus de Milo which resided in the school ground. The sport of Dis' Curse was quickly adopted all over Greece"

The statue was damaged beyond repair, losing both its arms in the incident. Dis' Curse eventually evolved and was renamed into what we now call discus.

In 1,438 BC there was the first city wide sports day for school boys in Athens with 600 young participants. The events tested the strength, agility and how wealthy your family was, as the games were incredibly unfair and corrupt. Cheating was rife and the games were fixed. Poorer competitors had sub-standard equipment like wooden swords and shields. Richer competitors bought pigs from a local market to ride on in the marathon and ran the last few miles. Most of these athletes got away with it, but some were disqualified for piggy backing.

The Aztecs had an unusual approach to sports days. Their main sport was called Tachli and it had similarities to basketball. The teams played on a stone court and they shot rubber balls through vertical stone rings. Naturally, every child had to take part, even those children with a letter from their mummy. This had the unfortunate consequence that only half the children would be at school the next day as the losers would take part in the SATs (Sacrificing Aztecs Torments) and were sacrificed to the gods. Luckily, this was only an annual event and did help to keep the Aztec class sizes down.

The modern sports day started in the Victorian period and was ordered by the government to ensure that everyone was out of the school while it was disinfected from head lice and so that the teachers could add all the missing apostrophes in the children's work. Schools took the opportunity to feed all the old, festering food from the kitchens to the visiting parents in the form of cakes, stale sandwiches and boiled eggs. In 1893, Mr I Eaton of Witham Abbey challenged the head of the local school saying, "This egg is so hard that I could run with it for 100 miles and repeatedly drop it and it would still be intact!" The two gentlemen only raced for 100 yards, but the Mr Eaton's point was made. Since then the egg and spoon race has been popular throughout the country.

In 1927, in the middle of the Great Depression, a race was about to take place at St. Globbings Secondary near Chester. The competitors were on the start line and were wearing their colours sashes they had been handed from a hessian bag just moments before. The mayor was about to fire the starting pistol from high up on a badly build soap box. The box gave way and the mayor dropped into the bag. In the confusion the gun went off and the mayor bounced down the hill. The runners and the audience chased after him, but he had crossed the finishing line before they could help him. The dazed mayor said to witnesses at the school, "I rather enjoyed that!" The sack race became an annual event in St. Globbers and the mayor presided over the race until his death in 1996 in a bungee jumping accident at the age of 104.

Sports day is full of traditions and a unique experience at each school. It is a day of joys and tears, celebrations and disappointments. It is an opportunity to bring the community together to celebrate young athletics striving to be the best they can. Some children loathe sports day, while some think it is the highlight of the year. Whatever you remember about sports day when you grow up, it is certain that you will remember it, and more importantly, who you were cheering on.

Questions

Name:

1) Name two activities which happen in the summer term mentioned in the text other than sports day. Write about your experience of these types of activities.

2) What happened 35,000 years ago?

3) Describe how athletes used to practise spear throwing.

4) Give details about what was found in Romania.

5) What needed further analysis from Romania and why?

6) What reason did the professor give for the children approaching the mammoth?

7) How did discus get its name?

8) What happened to the Venus de Milo?

9) Give details about two ways in which the sports day in Athens was unfair.

10) Why were Aztec classes so small?

11) Write a description of a game of Tachli using details from the text.

12) What happened in 1893?

Name:

13) Name three reasons cited in the text explaining why Victorian schools had sports day and comment on which reason is the most important.

14) Write the monologue (similar to a script) for what the sport day commentator for the race at St. Globbers School might have said.

15) Write a paragraph about the history of one other sports day event. Give details about how, when and where it was invented.

Extension task - On a separate sheet, write a balanced argument discussing the pros and cons of school sports days for the children, the school and the community.