

Stick Game/Handgame (simplified version)

One game played at social events and powwows is the Stick Game (Plateau and Canadian), also known as the Handgame (Plains). It's been called a relatively "simple game of intuition," but it is much more and can easily rise in intensity to a "fever pitch!" Major components of the stick game are the use of hand drums or poles (beating upon them, which establishes a rhythm of any songs sung), the rattles to distract opposing team members, the counting sticks, and the marked and unmarked bones (which today often is plastic playing pieces). Played for money and prizes or just for fun, stick games are rich in non-verbal communication and lean in the spoken word. In early times, only men could play, with women assisting with the singing and cheering. Today, women play as the "hidiers" or as the "guessers," but the drum still is played only by the men.



To start, two teams (usually of five or more participants each) assemble, seated in a row facing each other. To start, each team leader receives one set of bones and then attempts to correctly guess the "female" (unmarked) bone in the other's hands, with each team getting an equal chance to do so. The winner receives what is called the "kick stick," which is hidden from the rest of sticks, and then offers the other side the choice of which set of "live" sticks (five) to keep on their side. Thus each team has two live sets of sticks, with the kick stick hidden.

The objective of the game is to successfully hide your "bones" from the "guesses" of the other team, causing the other team to lose a "stick" with each wrong guess, eventually resulting in your team winning all the sticks and the game. You win when you can trick and hide your bones from your opponent.

As the game begins, the two "hidere" from one team conceal two sets bones, one in each hand – one is marked and is the "male" bone, the other isn't marked and is the "female" bone. The guesser from the other team will attempt to identify the female bones (unmarked) in the two hidere's hands.

The hand gestures used by the guesser are:

1. If both sets or just one set of the unmarked bones are thought to be in the left hands (i.e., both marked bones in the right hands of the hidere), the guesser will point with his/her index finger to the left.



2. If both sets or just one set of the unmarked bones are thought to be in the right hands, the guesser will point to the right with the index finger.



3. If both sets of the unmarked bones are thought to be in the "inside" hands of the hidere (both marked bones are in the opposite, outside two hands of the hidere), the guesser will hold his/her fingers together, palm flat and vertical, slicing downward.



4. If both sets of the unmarked bones are thought to be in the "outside" hands of the two hidere (both marked bones are in the opposite, innermost hands of the hidere), the guesser will hold his/her palm flat but horizontal, with the index finger and thumb extended in opposite directions.



If a guesser from the opposing team can identify which hand(s) conceal the "female" un-marked bone(s), the team wins those bone(s). When both sets are in play and only one set is correctly guessed, only those bones identified correctly are won. When both sets are eventually won, that team becomes the hidere and the other team becomes the guessers.

For each wrong guess the guessing team forfeits a stick to the other team. As a team loses sticks, the team first gives up their own live sticks and then any live sticks from other side they had won, which can be combined, until finally the last stick, the kick stick, is brought out and waved in front of team and played for. The first team who wins all 11 sticks wins the game. And etiquette requires that the winning team shakes hands with the losing team.

While contemplating his/her guess, the team hiding the bone(s) sings their stick game songs, and attempts to distract the guesser with hand and facial gestures, along with cheers of annoyance. The hider(s) move their arms and hands to the beat of the song, and conceal the bones not only in their closed hands, but behind their backs, under a cloth, or even under their "shirt," until the guess is about to be made. Then they hold out their closed hands, still concealing the bones, until the guess is formally made.

While the rules are few and relatively simple, the complicated head movements, fast hand signals, and "curious whelps" can be confusing to the "uninitiated." However, the songs and excitement of the game can be "infectious." It's the simplicity of the game that is said to allow both old and young, Indian and non-Indian to play together. Some stick game players look forward to the tournaments to help bring a laugh and a joy to life, and perhaps heal a grief over a year's loss. And there can be some serious cash circulated about the community.