# Games Pilgrims play

**By Kevin Paul Dupont**

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The Mayflower, the boat carrying the "visiting" team, arrived off Plymouth on Dec. 21, 1620. By then, the "home" team already had a thriving sports culture, one with roots in spirituality and conflict resolution.

Indigenous people of the 17th century typically played games throughout North America that today we know as lacrosse and soccer, and their children were adept at many sports, including both the shooting and dodging of arrows (the precursor to the sport known today as American politics).

The Wampanoags around Plymouth at the time of the Mayflower's arrival did not play lacrosse, according to Darius Coombs, associate director of the Wampanoag Indigenous Program at Plimoth Plantation. But football, similar to today's soccer, was extremely popular. Football games were played along the beach, with as many as 100 players tussling over a deerskin ball, stuffed with deer hair. Goals could be as wide as the beach itself and the sandy field up to a mile in length.

"Important to remember a couple of things," noted Coombs. "First, games were more than just sport. Often, they were to settle disputes, prevent war — because war was always the last choice of the Wampanoag.

"But it was also fun, too. People have this idea that in those times everything was all work and no play. But think about it; back then, there was plenty of time to play."

Native North Americans in the early 17th century were accomplished swimmers and runners — the fastest often selected to carry messages from village to village. Coombs said his forefathers also wrestled, but it was not the sport as we know it today.

"It was mostly about balance," he said. "The two wrestlers would put right foot to right foot, lock right hand to right hand, and then try to knock each other off balance."

Sadly, Globe archives could not produce any kind of a box score, Wampanoags vs. Pilgrims, from what is generally acknowledged as the original Thanksgiving feast at Plimoth Plantation in October 1621. No doubt it was the first in a long line of Thanksgivings when the respective coaches neglected to contact the local paper with essential details and game summaries.

The lone written account of the Plymouth harvest feast tells us it lasted three days, and that a half-dozen Plantation women prepared food for a party of nearly 150, 90 of whom were Wampanoags.

Squanto, the land's first known master field-and-streamer, was among the honored guests. A member of the Patuxet Wampanoags, Squanto spoke English, having learned it years before while enslaved in Europe. He taught the Pilgrims to fish and hunt and plant crops. We are told that NESN executives insist that Squanto was a dead ringer for Charlie Moore.

At some point during that first three-day festival, the two sides proudly displayed their hunting choix des armes. The locals took out their bows and arrows and proved their marksmanship. The visiting Pilgrims did the same with their English muskets.

Now, even without first-hand accounts, it's a fairly good bet that both sides were impressed with one another's hunting arms and prowess. The locals no doubt later retreated to their wetus (i.e. huts) knowing they had witnessed the ultimate game-changer in those muskets, and the game about to change had little to do with sports.

"A lot of people mistakenly think the two sides had a great [time] together, that it was a great venture," said Coombs. "It was far from that."

Did the hosts and guests break out the deerskin ball and kick it around the beach at the first harvest meal? Not likely. These were people with vastly different games, goals, and cultures. Pilgrims believed in six-day work weeks and Sundays devoted to God. Game-playing was minimal for the Pilgrims, and gambling was the devil's work. The Wampanoags, said Coombs, often wagered on the outcome of their football games. History shows that betting often was central to lacrosse games played by indigenous people.

At most, mused John Kemp, Coordinator of Colonial Training at Plimoth Plantation, the two sides at the first harvest possibly engaged in a centuries-old European custom that the Pilgrims referred to as "pitching the bar." This was not a drinking game.

The bar was a tree trunk of some length, its limbs sheared, and the winning "pitcher" was the one able to toss the trunk the greatest distance. Said bar was held vertically, the end of it clutched in a participant's hands that he positioned slightly below his waist. Balancing the bar in his hands as he ran, the participant would stop at a designated line and then heave the bar forward, ideally propelling it in a rainbow-like arch.

"We have no proof that they did this," said Kemp, noting that the language barrier itself limited mutual participation in sports. "But this is something we think is likely they shared. It was simple. No difficult rules to convey or interpret. Nothing culturally complex or threatening. But again . . . maybe."

The Pilgrims, who first tried Holland as a religious haven, arrived in the New World with a variety of games. A plimoth.org list of games includes such favorites of the day as naughts and crosses (tic-tac-toe), draughts (checkers), all hid (hide-and-seek), lummelen (keep away), and hop frog (leap frog).

Another Pilgrim favorite was "stool ball," a sport played to this day in England, and it may have been the mother of both cricket and baseball. Said stool, originally utilized by English milkmaids, was tipped upside-down and acted as a gate or wicket.

"We're still smarting down here over the Ken Burns documentary about baseball," Kemp said with a touch of mock indignation. "We think baseball started at Plimoth Plantation with stool ball." Maybe a do-over, Mr. Burns?

Governor William Bradford, in his journal account only weeks after the first Thanksgiving, noted his displeasure with some Plimoth Plantation members who had the gall to play stool ball on Christmas Day, 1621. Not all Plantation members observed Christmas as a day of celebration, and opted to make it an ordinary workday. Others, committed to enjoying their day off, played stool ball and pitching the bar, thus raising the governor's ire "that they should play [while] others work."

Outcome: Governor Bradford took away their stools and bars and told them to go home. The sports may have changed some over the last 389 years, but some things about the games we play are everlasting.

Kevin Paul Dupont's "On Second Thought" appears on Page 2 of the Sunday Globe Sports section. He can be reached at dupont@globe.com.

Correction: Because of a reporting error, the date the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth was incorrect in an earlier version of this story on Thanksgiving game-playing. The Mayflower arrived Dec. 21, 1620.