

Arctic Winter Games:

A Unique Blend of Sports and Culture

Have you ever dreamed of competing in an international snowshoe biathlon in chilly Iqaluit, Nunavut?

How about facing off with your opponent for a challenging game of arm pull, or meeting athletes from Russia and Scandinavia?

You can experience these captivating events and more at the Arctic Winter Games.

One of the main objectives of the first Arctic Winter games was to involve as many athletes as possible from northern regions.

Every two years, athletes gather from far and wide across the world's northern circumpolar regions for an exciting week of sporting competition. This unique event is an occasion for people living around the Arctic Circle to compete in many different sports, and share cultures from around the world. You might say it is the Olympics of the North.



How Did They Start?

The first Arctic Winter games took place in 1970 in Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories. They were initiated by Cal Miller, Northwest Territories Commissioner Stuart Hodgson and Yukon Commissioner James Smith. One of the main objectives was to involve as many athletes as possible from northern regions and to provide them with a forum for competition. The games were officially opened by then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and were a great success. Approximately 500 athletes, coaches and officials participated from the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alaska in the first Arctic Winter Games. Over the years, the Games have grown into a major celebration of circumpolar sports and cultures.

Values of the Games

The main purposes of the Games are athletic competition, cultural exhibition and social interchange. These are symbolized in the Arctic Winter Games International Committee logo, which consists of three interlocking rings, each one representing one of these three purposes. At the end of the Games a trophy is awarded to the team which best displays the spirit and values of the Games during the week of competition.

Sports and Culture

Like the Olympics, the Arctic Games bring athletes from different countries together to compete against each other in sporting events; the difference is the Arctic Winter Games feature only athletes from the North. Athletes and artists gather together from Greenland, Alaska, Russia, Iceland, Northern Scandinavia and Northern Canada. The Games also showcase Northern artists and performers during its entertaining cultural program held each evening.



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You may see Inuit throat-singing, Dene drumming, fast-paced Métis fiddling, and other exhilarating artistic performances. Not only do athletes compete against each other, but they also have an opportunity to learn about the culture and values of other northern regions in the world.

The Arctic Winter Games are a unique sporting event as they not only include sports played in the Canada Games and the Olympics, like skiing, hockey, basketball and gymnastics, but they also host Inuit games, Dene games and dog mushing — sporting events that are unique to Northern cultures. Sporting events include: alpine skiing and snowboarding, Inuit Arctic sports, Dene Arctic sports, badminton, basketball, cross-country skiing, curling, dog mushing, gymnastics, hockey, indoor soccer, snowshoeing, speed skating, table tennis, volleyball and wrestling.

Both the Inuit and Dene Games are traditional sports that originated in the North. At the Arctic Winter Games, the Inuit games consist of 11 different events: the one-foot high kick, the two-foot high kick, the airplane, the knuckle hop, the Alaskan high kick, the one-hand reach, the head pull, the arm pull, the sledge jump and the triple jump — all of which involve great skill, strength and concentration. The Dene Games are also very challenging and include the finger pull, hand game (a team-game), snow snake, the stick pull, and the pole push (another team game).

To compete in the Games, athletes participate in a three part process: regional trials, territorial trials and finally the Games themselves.

Medals and Ceremonies

Like any major sporting competition, the Arctic Games start with an opening ceremony, where the host city has the chance to present itself to the participating athletes and the world. Awards ceremonies are held to present athletes with their winning medals. The Arctic Games have a distinct and unique medal called the "Ulu medal." It is modeled on the all-purpose knife traditionally used by Inuit people. Athletes are awarded gold, silver and bronze Ulu for winning first, second and third place in their sporting events. The Games are closed with an official Closing Ceremony that celebrates the achievements of the athletes, the volunteers, the sponsors and the host community in staging the games.

To begin the arm pull, competitors pull slowly and steadily at the elbow while bracing the opposite hand on their opponent's leg, foot or ankle.

Here are the rules for two of the Arctic Sports — try them out with friends and see how well you do!

The Arm Pull:

To start, two players face each other sitting on the floor. Each player keeps their left leg straight and bends their right leg over the opponent's straightened leg. Both players lock their right arms together at the bent elbow and hold their opponent's right ankle with their left hand. Watches and bracelets should be removed from wrists and arms.

To begin play, competitors pull slowly and steadily at the elbow while bracing the opposite hand on their opponent's leg, foot or ankle. Players must pull only from inside the elbows.



There are three rounds in a competition, and the best of three wins. A coin flip determines the choice of arm for the first pull. The second pull is done with the opposite arm and the third pull is with the first choice of arms. To win a round, a player must either pull their opponent over, get their arm to straighten or make their opponent's hand touch the winner's chest. If a player falls sideways or the hand of the locked arm touches the floor, the pull is started over.

Snow Snake:

The goal of this game is to throw your snow snake the farthest along a groomed snow track. To start, make a clear track for the snow snake to travel along: build a long snowbank, about 1 metre high and 1 metre wide, and 100 metres long. (You can make it longer or shorter depending on how much space you have available.) Carve a long track in the pile, about 6 inches wide, and smooth it over thoroughly. If possible, water it for an icy surface.



The goal of the snow snake game is to throw your snow snake — a carved stick of hardwood — the farthest along a groomed snow track.

Now, you need a snow snake — traditionally, a snake is carved out of a straight stick of hardwood about 1.5 metres long and five to 10 cm in diameter at the large end. The bark is stripped off and the snake's head is marked off on the large end to measure about five to 10 cm in length. The rest of the stick is about three cm in diameter. The head of the snake should curve up like a ski. In the past, the snakes were carved and highly decorated on the non-sliding surfaces of the snake. For a quick version of a snow snake, try using an old hockey stick with the bottom cut off and carve one end so that it curves upwards slightly. This will help the snake move along the snowy track. If you want, take some time to make carvings and painted decorations on your snake.

To play, take turns with your opponents in throwing the stick down the track. If you want to play as a team, the person who throws the farthest in each round scores a point for his or her team. An additional point goes to the team with the player who has made the longest throw of the whole game. Athletes at the Arctic Games can throw their snow snakes over 90 metres. Do you think you can match their throws?

To learn more about the Arctic Winter Games, you can visit their website at: www.awg.ca

This information is also available through the Internet at www.inac.gc.ca



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