
Ball-Chasing for Beginners: A Brief Look at Sports on Pern

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I don't know what it's like elsewhere in the world, but here in the UK the past few months have been characterized by rampant World Cup fever - and the tournament hasn't even started yet! Every other advert on the TV or radio has some sort of soccer tie-in, if not an actual member of the England squad grinning at the camera, and with this feeding frenzy getting more frantic by the day, it seems like a good time to look at the various types of sport that might exist on Pern.

Sports on Pern are unlikely to exist in the sort of purified form seen on Earth, with professional sportsmen and women dedicating their lives to their chosen pursuits. The Pernese variants are likely to be simpler, with less fussy rules and more regional variations that take local circumstances into account. In a fairly physical culture without many of the forms of relaxation we take for granted (no TV-addicted couch potatoes on Pern!), simple competitive sports, more closely related to those played by off-duty schoolchildren than the professional leagues, may well be one of the primary forms of recreation available and as such are worthy of some examination.

On Earth, sports follow some definable patterns across cultures, and there's no reason to suspect that Pern would be any different. The ubiquitous ball games are a good place to start as these exist in any number of variations. There are the "kick something" and "carry something" variants, differing mainly in what parts of the body are allowed into contact with the ball, and the "hit/carry something with something else" variants. These mostly involve teams of people, with turns being taken between possession of the ball and either trying to possess the ball, or trying to prevent the other team's movement of the ball, or both. Most involve trying to move the ball towards a specific objective - a goal, a keep-away, a basket or whatever -- although in some, such as baseball/rounders, where the ball goes is less important than where the players go, and in others,

such as cricket, the distance the ball travels is important to the score.

Pern probably has any number of ball games that are similar to soccer or rugby because those are amongst the simplest of games -- just grab an inflated or stuffed object to act as a ball, define your boundaries and goals and a few basic rules, and you're away! These sorts of games can involve a lot of physical contact, and the levels of potential danger probably depend on how and where the match is played -- a game played for relaxation during a break from working the fields is probably going to be less dangerous than a grudge match between Holds at a gather. Protective clothing is undoubtedly completely non-existent, although that is unlikely to make the players more careful, as any rugby fan would be happy to tell you!

Football-type games may range from simple five-aside matches to something resembling old English football, where entire populations of villages would turn out to compete against a neighboring town, with the objective being to get the ball through the door of the opponents' church by whatever means necessary -- a variant of that one could prove popular with cotholds in those parts of Pern where settlements are close enough for it to be practical....

Pern probably also has rudimentary ball games that involve sticks and smaller balls, and "hitting the ball along the ground" is just as likely as "hitting a ball thrown into the air". The former is in many ways quite similar to the football-type games mentioned above, but with a smaller ball and sticks replacing feet as the striking object. Pernese games of this sort most probably resemble something like shinty, which is a simple form of hockey still occasionally found in British schools (I remember playing it when I was about 11!). With the "hitting the ball in the air" games, as mentioned above, the direction the ball travels in isn't particularly important -- it's the time between the striking of the ball and its subsequent retrieval that is important, giving the hitter a chance

to move freely and to accomplish whatever the goals of the particular game are.

Another variant on the "hit something" game is one in which a ball is hit across a net. Of the various forms of this one found on Earth, something like volleyball is the one most likely to be played by the Pernese as it is simple and a team game; more complex games like tennis and badminton are far less likely as they involve specialized equipment for the use of small numbers of players. For the same reasons, games like golf and snooker/pool are unlikely to develop on Pern. The Pernese are a participatory people, and as such are likely to prefer sports that a number of people can play at once.

Aside from team games there are more direct competitions -- not that the above don't involve competition. These however, are more personal displays of prowess -- racing (human or animal), wrestling, etc. generally in front of an audience at a Gather or Festival. We know from the books that horse racing is very popular with Holders, and wrestling is specifically mentioned in later books. There are probably numerous variants on the racing theme -- foot races, cross-country races for both humans and horses, even swimming in areas with suitable rivers or bays. There are also likely to be contests held in activities that are important to the Pernese daily life -- we consider things like archery (with longbow or crossbow) a sport, but to the Pernese it's a vital hunting skill, as may be accuracy with things like slingshot and javelin (on Pern, accuracy with a javelin would likely be considered more impressive than the distance it can be thrown).

Demonstrations of prowess at occupational tasks are also very likely to be used as Gather entertainment, whether it's handling weaponry, roping and tying cows or other such "rodeo" tricks, lifting/dragging heavy objects, climbing, rowing, etc. Think of a typical Hold Gather (during the day anyway) as the ultimate Country Fair, with many of the same activities for exactly the same reasons. What sports and games are popular in a given locale will undoubtedly be influenced by what goes on there -- swimming isn't likely in the depths of Igen, and seaholders are more likely to be interested in mast-climbing contests than in sheep-shearing.

Gathers would also be a good place for inter-Hold team games to take place -- the Pernese have a very strong sense of community and people like to express that by fielding a team that beats another community. These teams will be made up of people from within the communities in question - herders, farmers, soldiers etc. Pern is a world in which people

cannot afford to spend too much time playing -- everybody's contribution is needed to make a Hold work and few would feel happy at working to support someone whose sole contribution is to play a sport. Even the jockeys in MORETA were herders and horse trainers in their everyday life, and they worked for some of the richest men on the planet. Pern is simply not culturally inclined towards the idea of sport for its own sake, something that has become all too prevalent on modern-day Earth.

That said, in any situation where teams are competing you are going to get some players who are better than others, and those players will suddenly be in demand for their ability. A good player from one Hold may well find another Holder trying to entice him or her away to work for them, if only to be able to say that he has a winner. That phenomenon is a far cry from an entire class of professional athletes, however. One way to avoid this sort of thing could be to have teams for sporting events randomly chosen at Gathers, but human nature being what it is, people would likely prefer to see an active competition between two Holds!

So that's sport in the Holds. Each of the Crafts probably has its own favorite home-grown contests too, in addition to whatever sports are most popular at the Hold they're nearest to. Some of the Crafts have a physical dimension that would allow them to get in on the idea of sport as played by holders; others probably hold their own internal contests involving the practice of the Craft (what the SCA/Far Isles would call an "Arts and Sciences" competition).

In the Weyrs, sport literally has a whole new dimension, as the dragons allow them to include flying games. On the more human level, the Weyrs (and to a lesser extent the Crafts) will have their own variants on the sports popular in the Holds, albeit minus the more occupational ones. If anything they will have more sports and games than are popular in any given Hold, because people are brought in from all over the world, bringing their own local knowledge with them -- a Hold's knowledge of sports and games may cover a fair bit of the surrounding territory, but it certainly isn't continent-spanning.

An aspect of Weyr life that we have heard about in the books, but never seen, is the infamous "Spring Games", which presumably take place over the Spring Equinox Festival. These were described as being inter-Wing games at Benden during the Interval, but that was when Benden was the only Weyr on Pern -- these days it may be reasonable to assume that there's a certain bit of inter-Weyr competition going on as well. The precise definition

of "Spring" makes things a bit interesting here, as spring in the Northern Continent is autumn in the South and vice-versa, and it's likely that the southern Weyrs hold their own Spring Games that draw northern riders, while riders from the south could pop north to participate in the Northern games. Logres has yet to experience a spring as an independent Weyr, of course, and whether or not it will get organized enough for games in 2555 has yet to be seen -- hopefully we'll be able to get something together for T#4, which should be covering that time period. That said, Logres has to feed itself, and its games will necessarily be lower-key than those at Benden during the last Interval, when the games seemed to be all some of the riders lived for.

What exactly happens during the Spring Games is wide open -- they've never really been described. There is mention of racing in TWD, although the context isn't mentioned. Aerial races would certainly make sense, however, possibly with separate competitions for each dragon color, and there may also be tests of agility, formation flying, and of accuracy with flame. Somebody once suggested organizing a fake Threadfall, with rope dipped in dye and dropped while wet, so it would be obvious if the competitors had been hit. A contest of this sort would certainly account for the fatal injury taken by Lytol's Larth -- close-quarters flaming isn't something really found in any situation other than Threadfall or a simulation thereof.

One good point about these dragon-based sports and the training for them is that it helps to keep the dragons exercised and fit. With the ending of Threadfall, the dragons are going to need a lot of exercise to replace the workouts they got flying 'Fall and doing sweep watches. If they don't get this sort of level of activity they could face serious health problems and Logres may well find itself stuck with a lot of fat and lazy dragons with atrophied wing muscles -- not ideal for mating flights (which are in themselves a form of competition, albeit a biologically inspired one)!

The Pernese are a competitive, participatory people, and it makes sense for them to have some interest in sporting events and competitions. The precise nature of these contests is open to wide interpretation, dependent on where your characters are and where they originally came from, but as always the key is to make them feel Pernese in our writing. Keep things simple and in context for Pernese society and avoid the over-specialization so often seen in Terran sports, and mention of these

competitions could make for an interesting and entertaining story focus.

In the meantime, I still have to get through the World Cup....