

Foreign Game Description: Three Sticks

Definitions:

Clear – Make and succeed in the jumps over all three sticks without failure

Forfeit – Refers to a player's decision to leave the game after assessing the next round's challenge

Bets – The toys and personal items gambled on by each player upon entering the game.

Bet Point – The point of distance from the third stick at which a bet is placed in the beginning of the game to create a challenge.

The game of “Three Sticks” (directly translated from Hebrew) has been around for a few generations now. According to my dad, who was born in 1951, the game dates back to the period of the British rule in Israel, (1918-1948) and probably way before that.

Apparently, my grandmother played it as a child in Australia during World War I and so did my grandfather in Poland in that same period. When I asked my dad if he remembered

any specific games that he played as a child in early Israel and are not common or popular amongst kids anymore, he shook his head in disappointment and responded, “well of course, “Three Sticks” was the most popular and competitive game around, there isn't a person my age who didn't spend his/her afternoons playing this game, from first grade all the way up to the tenth (although it actually had no age limit for play). It was one of those games that everyone wanted in on”. He explained that back in those times, when kids didn't have computers or television (he sounded angry with the new youth), if

you weren't at home doing homework chances are you were probably outside with the rest of the neighborhood kids playing games and being social. In the early years of Israel, many of the families had just come to the country recently from all different parts of the world and began settling down to form the Israeli country as it is known today. This meant that lots of different kids had many different backgrounds and the later local popular games took a while to set in amongst them because factors such as language and cultural differences interfered. One thing everyone had in common however, is sports. Back then, athletic and physical based games were the core of the social scene. Kids were active, and they would enjoy these games, which were usually extremely simple to set up and included physical activity as well as friendly competition.

The game of "Three Sticks" involved three sticks, about two feet in length. Although it didn't matter how exactly how long the sticks were, it was important that they were long enough to be used as clear distance markers. The sticks could be branches, broomsticks, or even stretched out jump rope. First, every kid who wished to play would bring in a toy, or personal item that he/she was willing to give up in the case of a loss or "forfeit". "Forfeit" refers to a player's decision to leave the game after assessing the next round's challenge. It is a form of "losing" and the person would then be required to give up his/her toy anyway. The sticks would be placed on the ground parallel to each other, with a starting distance of about one foot in between them. Then, just like in card games, each player would bet on a distance beyond the third and furthest stick that he/she thought they could clear, and placed their toy on the ground at that distance. This point of distance from the third stick was called "Bet Point" Since most players were usually similar in physical abilities (play was usually divided into same-age

groups), the toys/items (bets) would be placed not very far away from one another, and the ones that decided to turn down the challenge “forfeited” from the game. Then a final round of bets took place, and then the game itself began.

The goal of each player was to consecutively jump over the three sticks, one leg at the time without stopping and clear all three of them. So, three jumps were required of a player at any given turn: One initial jump over the first stick, and with the same foot and motion used to land, make another jump over the second stick, and then again over the third stick without stopping. In other words, each player had to make three long jumps, consecutively on the same run without stopping and clear all three sticks without stepping on them. In the distance between each stick, only one step was allowed. After each attempt, a player would then run to the back of the line and wait for their next turn. Only one attempt was allowed for each player. Since the distance between the sticks was so short at the beginning, the players were required to make their attempt jumping on one leg only in the first three rounds. This was used to filter players out early in the game and not waste time. A referee would be assigned to stand on the side and judge whether the players made it over the sticks or not in the case of uncertainty. The referee’s job was also to increase the distance between the three sticks for the remaining players after each round (once every player had made his/her attempt). The distance would be decided upon based on the distance of the longest jump made by a player. The referee would move the third and last stick to the point where the longest jump landed, and adjust the second stick according to that, keeping an even distance between the three sticks at all times. After this was done, the players could either accept the new challenge and attempt to beat it, or forfeit. The winner of the game is the player who made it to the greatest distance without

landing on any of the sticks. Once that player could not jump any farther and landed on or before a stick, the game was over. Since the toys (bets) were placed along the sticks in the direction of the jumps, the winning player would win all the toys that he/she beat in distance. Because it is almost always easier to succeed at a jump attempt when a marker is placed on a specific point on the ground to show the goal distance to be cleared, a good strategy would be to get used to attempting to clear the last stick only by no more than a couple of inches. This would allow a player to accurately assess his/her current abilities and decide whether to forfeit or stay in the game. Also, it was important to keep a certain pace, so if a player cleared a greater distance than he/she had to, that only meant that they asked for a bigger challenge. This would probably mean getting unnecessarily tired or fatigued. Keeping a slow pace of the game even if one didn't necessarily need to was key.

This fast paced game served as one of the many after-school activities kids had to keep themselves busy with back in the day. It was not for everyone, as the less athletic kids would usually choose not to play and only the people who were willing to give up a toy or a personal item were allowed in the game. This is the biggest disadvantage of this game. If you didn't think you could win, you wouldn't want to play. This can apply to almost every game, but what with Three Sticks the line between the athletic kids and the non-athletic kids was usually clear. Another problem with this game is the role of gambling. Although money isn't on the line, Three Sticks is obviously a form of gambling, because personal items and toys were on the line. This could lead to extreme competitiveness, addiction and obsession. The age group of kids playing this game was arguably way too young for this type of play. However, Three Sticks provided the group with a sense of competitiveness as well as unity. Everyone was playing not only for the

purpose of winning toys or items, but also for the fun in it and athletic competitiveness it provided. Also, one could argue that the level of athleticism is never equal, even between the players who agreed to participate and if one of the players was a strong athlete, he/she would keep winning every game without giving others who are less athletic a chance.

This is where athletic fatigue came in, and played a role of something similar to a negative feedback system that would make sure everyone gets a fair chance at winning the toys. This game was very fast paced and had no limits on how many players could play at a time. When only a few players were left standing and the wait line was gone, those players would get no break between attempts and would have to try and clear greater and greater distances with each turn consecutively. Physical fatigue would usually impact the winning players and when a new game got started (usually immediately after), these players would not perform as well and give other more rested players a chance.

This meant that the toys kept circulating around the players until everyone decided to stop playing for the day. At the end almost everyone came out with something, and if not, there was always the next day. This probably gave a sense of unity to the kids at those times, because no toy or item really belonged to one kid; if you wanted to play, you had to sacrifice your toy. According to my dad, the incentive of competition provided by this game was greater than the importance of any toy or item placed as a bet, therefore the kids kept coming back to play every day. This sense of togetherness was extremely important during that period in early Israel, because many had just arrived to this newly declared from different parts of the world things were still a bit socially shaky. Therefore, it was also important for the kids to create their own culture and play their part in unifying the different cultures. Play was something that everyone had and loved, no

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matter where you came from. It was a common thing that everyone shared, and it brought people together.