

Horseshoe Pitching; a History Thereof

So why throw them at a stick? The history of horseshoe pitching is wrought with myths and inconsistency. One widely accepted falsehood is that poor Roman foot soldiers gathered the discarded horseshoes of their superiors and used them to mimic the Olympic discus throwers they idolized. The problem with this story is that Roman horses were equipped with 'horse boots' made of cloth or hide. Later, the Romans used large flat strapped-on plates--the aerodynamic U-shape wasn't developed until centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire. However, the idea of horseshoe pitching can be traced back to Roman soldiers. During their idle hours, the soldiers occupied themselves with games that consisted of tossing metal rings over stakes pounded into the ground. Whether these first metal rings were actually horseshoes is a matter of some debate. Some say, the real root of horseshoe pitching is the game of *quoits*- which actually does have Roman origins.

Which came first--Horseshoes or Quoits?

There is no doubt that the games of horseshoes and quoits are closely related. A quoit is a metal disc with a hole in the middle that may have at one time been a weapon. A game of quoits consists of

attempting to throw the disc over a hob or pin embedded in soft clay. Some historians speculate that Roman officers played quoits while their underlings improvised by pitching horseshoes. Others believe it happened the other way around. Soldiers began by pitching horseshoes and someone began forming the shoes into rings.

War Games

Either way, we know that quoits was being played in England in the 14th century, much to the chagrin of the English rulers who felt the game distracted men from military training, particularly archery. The game was outlawed in 1388. By the 16th century, English peasants were playing both horseshoes and quoits and would later export both games to North America. Like the Roman soldiers, North American soldiers found horseshoes to be good wartime recreation. During the Revolutionary War, U.S. soldiers evidently played horseshoes causing the Duke of Wellington to write, “the war was won by the pitchers of horse hardware.” Union soldiers pitched mule shoes in Civil War camps.

From Military Camp to Backyard

Soldiers took the game home with them after the wars and horseshoe courts sprang up in communities across the U.S. and Canada. The game

became a family sport that was enjoyed by men, women, boys and girls.

There is some evidence that the first horseshoe club was founded in Pennsylvania in 1899. The first “world championship” horseshoe tournament took place in Bronson, Kansas in a 1909 horse show.

The rules of this first tournament called for two-inch tall stakes to be placed thirty-eight feet apart. Ringers were worth five points and leaners counted three. Shoes that were close to the stake were worth one point. Games were played to twenty-one points. Thirty-four men entered the tournament and the winner, Frank Jackson, was appropriately awarded a belt with a horseshoe buckle. Jackson would go on to win six more world championships. He still ranks fourth on the all-time horseshoe world championship list.

Still today, people play horseshoes and related games all over the world.

www.sportsknowhow.com/horseshoes/history/horseshoes-history.shtml

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