

Medieval european sports

[History](#), [Middle Ages](#)



Sports in the Middle Ages The sports of medieval Europe were less-well-organized than those of classical antiquity. Fairs and seasonal festivals were occasions for men to lift stones or sacks of grain and for women to run smock races (for a smock, not in one). The favourite sport of the peasantry was folk football, a wild no-holds-barred unbounded game that pitted married men against bachelors or one village against another.

The violence of the game, which survived in Britain and in France until the late 19th century, prompted Renaissance humanists, such as Sir Thomas Elyot, to condemn it as more likely to maim than to benefit the participants. The nascent bourgeoisie of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance amused itself with archery matches, some of which were arranged months in advance and staged with considerable fanfare. When town met town in a challenge of skill, the companies of crossbowmen and longbowmen marched behind the symbols of St.

George, St. Sebastian, and other patrons of the sport. It was not unusual for contests in running, jumping, cudgeling, and wrestling to be offered for the lower classes who attended the match as spectators. Grand feasts were part of the program, and drunkenness commonly added to the revelry. In Germanic areas a Pritschenkoenig was supposed to simultaneously keep order and entertain the crowd with clever verses. The burghers of medieval towns were welcome to watch the aristocracy at play, but they were not allowed to participate in tournaments or even, in most parts of Europe, to compete in imitative tournaments of their own. Tournaments were the jealously guarded prerogative of the medieval knight and were, along with hunting and hawking, his favourite pastime. At the tilt, in which mounted

knights with lances tried to unhorse one another, the knight was practicing the art of war, his *raison d'être*.

He displayed his prowess before lords, ladies, and commoners and profited not only from valuable prizes but also from ransoms exacted from the losers. Between the 12th and the 16th century, the dangerously wild free-for-all of the early tournament evolved into dramatic presentations of courtly life in which elaborate pageantry and allegorical display quite overshadowed the frequently inept jousting. Some danger remained even amid the display. At one of the last great tournaments, in 1559, Henry II of France was mortally wounded by a splintered lance.

Peasant women participated freely in the ball games and footraces of medieval times, and aristocratic ladies hunted and kept falcons, but middle-class women contented themselves with spectatorship. Even so, they were more active than their contemporaries in Heian Japan during the 8th to 12th centuries. Encumbered by many-layered robes and sequestered in their homes, the Japanese ladies were unable to do more than peep from behind their screens at the courtiers' mounted archery contests