

## Taking Risks

Animals at play are also training for the unexpected. In play, animals learn about the world around them and their own physical limits. The need to test those limits, and experience unpredictable situations, could explain why animals sometimes seem to prefer play that is a bit dangerous.

A study of Siberian ibexes at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago showed that even though half their enclosure was flat and grassy — a perfect place to frolic<sup>3</sup> in safety — the young goats chose to play most of the time on a steep, rocky area where they were much more likely to get hurt. Why did they place themselves in danger?

Beckoff believes that such play helps animals develop flexibility — in their minds as well as their muscles — so that they are better prepared to deal with unexpected or uncontrolled events. In the confusion of fleeing a sudden attack by a predator, an ibex may stumble or crash into another member of the herd. But if it has had lots of practice regaining its footing in play, its misstep is less likely to spell disaster.

## Playing for Smarts

Research shows that smarter animals spend more time playing. Elephants play more than horses. Wolves play more than rabbits. And parrots play more than ducks or sparrows. Smarter animals also play in more creative and complex ways. Not surprisingly, humans and chimpanzees are among the most playful species.

- [10] Could play actually help the brain grow? Some scientists think so. They believe that play exercises the brain like lifting a weight exercises a muscle. They even call play “brain food.” So play on! Your brain will thank you for it.

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- [5] Ball games were popular with some groups, who made balls out of carved bone or wood. Sometimes small pieces of animal skins were stitched together and stuffed to make a ball. Most ball games involved hitting or kicking the ball.

While sportsmanship was important, games were rough and rules were few. Women and girls often played separately from men and boys. A popular team sport for women and girls was shinny. Using sticks that looked a bit like modern hockey sticks, the players tried to move a ball down the field to score a goal. Players had to work as a team to be successful. Shinny also could be rough sometimes.

In many areas, lacrosse was the most popular sport for men and boys. It was played by two opposing teams. The teams could have any number of players — from a few dozen to a few hundred — as long as each team had the same number. Each player had a stick with a scoop-shaped woven basket at one end. Using these basket-sticks, teammates passed a ball down the field and tried to score a goal. Lacrosse was a physically demanding<sup>7</sup> and intense game. The Cherokee called it “little war.” Players were allowed to pull hair, hit each other with their stick, and even wrestle.

Six hundred years ago, kids played tug-of-war and guessing games. They traded with each other and competed for the best prizes. Boys and girls played together and separately, having fun and learning skills they would use when they grew up. Many games we play today — lacrosse, baseball, hockey, and soccer — came from Native American sports. Rough-and-tumble competition, yes. But teamwork and cooperation are an equally important part of the legacy of these first American games.

Today, the Iroquois Lacrosse Association League is comprised<sup>8</sup> of eight teams, all made up of Native players. The Iroquois Nationals team competed in the World Lacrosse Championships held in Australia in 2002. The Iroquois Nationals is the only Native American team sanctioned<sup>9</sup> to compete as a national team. Various Native American nations continue to play forms of lacrosse, sometimes simply called stick ball, during their festivals.

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7. requiring a lot of strength and energy  
8. **Comprise (verb):** to be made up of  
9. to give official approval for something