

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

Games of the North: Playing for Survival



Arctic Outlook. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.



The Arctic Circle. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.



Tribes of Alaska. Image Courtesy of NAPT.

“The games you play were given to you so that you are fully aware of who you are inside. These aren’t just games, they’re survival skills .”

— Big Bob Aiken (Inupiaq); Barrow, Alaska.

In ***Games of the North***, Director Jonathon Stanton follows the lives of four Native Alaskan athletes as they compete in the traditional sports of their ancestors. Mental strength and physical endurance are tested with contests ranging from high kicking to seal hopping. But such games are more than sport—they instill a survival instinct for living in the Arctic, building perseverance, strength and Alaska Native values.

This Viewer Discussion Guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film, as well as explore issues surrounding individual strength, sense of community, honor and heritage.

PRODUCER'S NOTES

Jonathon Stanton, Producer/Director

As a ski mountaineer, I was originally drawn to Alaska for its vast mountain ranges and raw beauty. What kept me coming back was its people.

My introduction to the First Nation villages was as an extreme skier climbing mountains across the North while in my early twenties. I love the ruggedness and purities of the Arctic wilderness and share the unexplainable lure to explore further and further North. The warmth of these communities will stay with me forever. I have always felt welcome there and I am inspired from the connectedness and support within each village. Everyone knows everyone and they all look out for one another—in contrast to the giant cities and sprawling suburbs most of us know.



Jonathon Stanton

Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.

When a friend first showed me the Native Games, I was blown away by the level of athleticism and grueling strength, becoming immediately drawn-in as both an athlete and filmmaker. I was in awe of the community support between every athlete. Witnessing these sports, I experienced a value system which raises the personal strengths of each athlete and builds community bonds.

In 2003, my team and I began filming a documentary short entitled *To Play the Games* where we found our characters and explored the games during a single sporting event. Reviews for the film were extremely positive and viewers wanted more characters, history, culture and village life. Thus, began the long journey to create the documentary film *Games of the North*.

Throughout filming, David and Brian's story touched me the most on a personal level—as I myself came from a home with substance abuse. Like them, I found healing and a way into manhood through focusing my energy on sports. By taking huge risks in the mountains, I was immersed in the perfection and strength to gain the clarity that I so craved. More importantly, I found supportive team members to rely upon for survival and strength. The difference was that the Native Games accomplished the same benefits but could be played anywhere. They didn't need an extreme wilderness location with complex logistics and equipment, they could be played in your living room.



Following our four characters across Alaska as they live, compete, hunt, train and pursue their goals are some of the most rewarding experiences in my life. Their open trust and ability to tell their stories is a great, personal responsibility and thus, I gave my upmost attention to accurately document their journey. With detail and authenticity, I wanted to bring to you the complex, interconnectedness of the Inuit culture. At the core of the village life lies the community and the values that sustain it. It has always been my intention to show the relevance of the games today and how the values they support directly impact and strengthen the community as a whole. This is a model for building communities and partnerships through strengthening and supporting the individual in all of us—ancient values that our society can put to good use.

David Thomas (Inupiat) performs the Alaska high kick.
Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.



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BY THE NUMBERS

Part I: About Alaska's First Nations

Unlike the Reservation system imposed by the U.S. Government in the continental United States, the Alaskan Tribes have a governing body known as the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN membership includes **178 villages** (both Federally-recognized Tribes and village corporations), 13 regional Native corporations, 12 regional non-profit and Tribal consortiums. These organizations run both the Federal and State program.

In **1971**, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) negotiated the largest land settlement in the history of the United States—the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* (ANCSA). The historic nature of this land settlement has not been matched anywhere in the world and essentially set-up a “living law” which established an ongoing relationship with the United States Government. AFN is governed by a **37-member board** which is elected at the annual convention held each October.

Benny Benson, a **13-year-old boy**, designed Alaska's state flag in a contest in 1927. Benny was part Russian-Aleut (mother) and part Swedish (father). He was placed in an orphanage by his father when his mother died. Benny received \$1,000 from the contest. He used the money to pay for his education.

There are **seven major linguistic groups** in Alaska—some of which divide themselves further into smaller groups based on geographic distribution, river valleys, mountain ranges, forests, etc., but **the big seven** are as follows: Athabascan, Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Tlingit, Haida, Aleut and Tsimshian.

Slightly less than half of all Alaskan Natives live in rural areas. Many of these rural villages are located off of the road network and have a population of **50 to 500 people**.

Sixty-percent of the Alaskan Native subsistence harvest is made up of fish; **20%** land mammals; **14%** marine mammals; and the remaining **6%** of the rural harvest of wild food is made up of birds, shellfish, plants and berries. Source: <http://www.aaanativearts.com/alaskan-natives/index.html>

Part II: About Canada's First Nations

In **1970**, the inaugural Northern Games were held in Inuvik, Northwest Territories of Canada—coinciding with the Northwest Territories Centennial. The Northern Games Society has since been supporting this cultural event for **nearly four decades**.

In a research paper regarding the Native studies programs in Canada, John Price writes, “By counting the Native studies courses in the catalogs of the **50 largest Canadian universities and colleges**, I estimate that an equivalence of only **66 faculty positions of the 35,733 total full-time faculty positions** in Canada (Royce 1979) are currently used in teaching courses with predominant Native studies content.” Source: <http://www4.uwm.edu/letsai/ais/pdf/canadian.pdf>

There are **over 630 First Nations communities** in Canada speaking **more than 50 languages**, divided into **six cultural divisions in eight geographical locations**. Source: http://www.aaanativearts.com/canadian_tribes_AtoZ.htm

There are **over 600 recognized First Nations governments or bands** encompassing **1,172,790 people** (2006 Census) spread across Canada with distinctive Aboriginal cultures, languages, art and music.



Drop the Bomb. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.

EXPLORING THE FACTS

1. Many of us think of games as “just for fun.” How do the “Games of the North” differ from what society thinks of as a “game?” When you were growing up, what games of physical skill and mastery did you and your childhood friends play? How did they compare with these “Games of the North?”

2. It is hard for many of us to imagine living in the harsh and beautiful terrain of the far North, yet for centuries the Natives of Alaska and Canada have lived, survived and thrived there. Although modern times have somewhat made life easier, there are still many obstacles to overcome. What do you think was—and currently are—the most important factors for the communities of the far North to stay strong?

3. Many modern American communities have populations that change constantly like waters flowing into a river. If you compare these modern communities with those featured in the film, do you think these isolated communities have experiences that we no longer have? What would those experiences be? Compare the differences and the advantages or disadvantages of both lifestyles. What experiences would be the same no matter what?

4. In the film, we witness the respect the young people demonstrated toward their elders, as well as how the youth are given great care and training to prepare them for the future. Do you think mainstream society has changed in how it regards both its elders and its youth? What are the changes? How do you feel about these changes?

5. Each one of the athletes featured in the film seemed intensely focused not just on winning but on the difficult, personal challenge of the task. Each athlete attempts to improve and beat his or her own record. In a world where winning sometimes seems like that is all that counts, how do you feel about a culture that encourages the building of strength and endurance—and raising the bar of our own abilities?

6. In 2000, the Arctic Sea’s ice cap was measured to be 2.7 million sq. miles. In ten years, the ice cap has melted to 1.9 million sq. miles. Not only is the distance of the ice cap decreasing, but so is the thickness of the ice. Scientists say that a smaller ice cap will reflect less sunlight, leading to warmer global temperatures. Name two proposed results of the polar ice caps melting in addition to the two listed:
 1. Sea levels will rise.
 2. Ice caps are fresh water and will make the ocean less salty as they melt, throwing the ecosystem off-balance.



Let the games begin! Alaska’s own two-time Olympic Medalist Rosey Fletcher lights the torch of the Arctic Winter Games in Kenai, Alaska. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Set-up a corner in your recreation room and hang a ball or object from the ceiling. Review the one foot high kick in the film and attempt it yourself or practice reaching for the ball with one foot. Recognize that mastery of such a feat takes many trials; now, proceed to work slowly and cautiously toward your goal.

2. Overcoming racism and fear of others who are not like us requires that we learn about people from other cultures. Choose a Tribe from the far North, Canada or Alaska to learn about. Explore the ways that the people of this Tribe are different from your "Tribe" and then compare the many ways that you are the same.

3. While most people are not forced to live a "subsistence lifestyle"—where all that is needed comes directly from the local environment—many of us could contribute to both our health and a "greener" world by eating only local foods. Try for one week (it may need to be a summer month) to purchase and eat only local foods or food that you have grown or hunted. Was it difficult or easier than you imagined?

4. Find out when the next Northern Games will be held. Make it a point to learn more about the many Tribes that are participating, the games that will be played, how far people are traveling to participate, etc.

5. How do the Northern Games compare to the Olympic Games? What are the differences? What are the similarities?



Jesse Frankson, from Point Hope, Alaska, compares the cost of food while in a Fairbanks supermarket. Due to the location of some villages, the price of goods may exceed double the national average. This is all the more reason that subsistence hunting is important to maintain in this area. Currently, the practice of subsistence hunting is becoming more difficult due to climate change. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.



David Thomas (Inupiat) with blueberries. Image Courtesy of Starseed Media, Inc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Information About the Games

<http://www.northerngames.org/games>



The Alaska Native Heritage Center

<http://www.alaskanative.com>



Information About the Native Tribes of Alaska and Canada

<http://www.native-languages.org/alaska.htm>

<http://www.aaanativearts.com>



Additional Websites

www.ankn.uaf.edu

www.alaskool.org

www.echospace.org

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