

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 75: Go Sports Team, Go! This podcast is supported by our amazing Patrons, such as Brendan. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. It is the first day of 2022 here in New Zealand and I hope all of you had a great Christmas and new years! Now that the celebrations are over though, it is time to get back to it and learn some more about our past, so buckle up, cause my December break was spent preparing heaps of episodes for you to be released over the next six months. Today we are going to start looking into something a little different compared what we have done previously. Whereas most topics we have covered so far have mostly had some sort of practical element to them, whether that be for worldly health such as food, clothing and shelter or spiritual health, such as karakia, this episode we are going to be talking about activities that pre-European Māori did just for fun. Things like sports and board games, called taonga tākaro in Te Reo. Of course, it can be and should be argued that these are important for health as well, whether that be physical, mental or spiritual but you see a lot discourse around Māori being a 'stone age society' with all the cultural assumptions that it comes with and I want the next few episodes, more so than previous, to really work to dispel that myth. So hopefully over the next eight or so episodes we will have a better understanding of one of the aspects that binds humanity together; the desire for a bit of fun.

Where I think we will start is the sports that involved running around a bit or otherwise required a fair amount of physical exertion. Some games that were focussed more on mental ability could also involve physical elements but wouldn't require nearly as much sweat. Māori had a whole range of physical games from really straightforward ones that involved seeing who could toss a large rock the furthest to complex games that had a lot of similarity to modern sports like rugby. Some of these would be competed in at festival and competition events to see who was the very best in the region. These competitions were called kaipara festivals. Each of these festivals and what events they contained varied from iwi to iwi as they would reflect what kind of skills were important in the environment that they lived. What I mean by that is South Island iwi who lived near mountains and had to frequently cross them would likely hold marathon style events to collect pounamu whereas iwi that spent a lot of time on the coast may have events more catered around the water, such as swimming or waka races. Naturally you wanted to test the abilities that competitors probably had a good deal of skill in, which were likely the ones that resulted from the sort of landscape they lived in. It also helps that the sort of events and skills that audiences would want to see tested are the ones most relevant to them. There's a reason that New Zealand, an island nation, tends to be good at and enjoy watching rowing and sailing type events at the Olympics. Whatever the event, usually they were designed to test the strength, endurance, stamina, speed or agility of the competitors.

As mentioned, Māori engaged in that favourite of human pastimes, arguably the oldest sport in the world, that I think nearly every culture has invented. That sport being 'See that heavy thing over there? Wanna see who can throw it the furthest?' In fairness they weren't always something that was really heavy, spears and poi could be used but large rocks were definitely involved. These types of throwing events were called taumāhekeheke, though that word nowadays seem to be a more widespread term meaning games or competitions. To go back to the Olympics as an example, Taumāhekeheke o Te Ao is the Te Reo term for that event but then again, linguistics is tricky and there are always nuances and exceptions. The rocks would be about 20-30kg, which was possibly meant to simulate the weight of the average moa. As for the spears, they would often be made of mānuka and be about 1.8-2.5m long, so they were also quite substantial. The idea behind using these items was to build up muscle, particularly in the arms and legs, as well as coordination. This type of exercise and developing these skills were, as you might expect, quite useful for warfare. These events acted as good training for the real deal and were considered to be kinda like arenas for that purpose. We even get a particular account of these skills transferring directly to the battlefield

during a siege of a Ngāti Kahungunu pā at Whakaki Lagoon in Hawkes Bay. The ones doing the sieging were from Waikato and their rangatira invited a rather famed Kahungunu man, Te Rito-o-re-Rangi, to leave the pā to show off his spear throwing skill. Te Rito selected a man quite some distance behind the chief, saying he would throw it at that bloke to prove his prowess. However, as the Waikato rangatira turned to look at the targeted man, Te Rito threw the spear at the much closer chief, the spear apparently going clean through him and killing him instantly. This must have put the shits up the Waikato army as they didn't ask for a second demonstration.

Running, as it turns out, is another one of those pastimes that crosses time, space and culture. Tākaro omaoma included all sorts of running events, both long and short distance. Sprints were usually about 70m where they would run to a rākau, stick, on the ground. Alternately, they could be 140m, which meant that once they reached the stick the runners would sprint back to the starting line to complete the race. These 140m sprints would sometimes have to carry a heavy rock as well to really test their mettle. As for longer races, these would be set between a certain period of time. To make it nice and easy, this was often sunrise to sunset, so approx. 12hrs. And they would need all 12 of those hours cause the distances they would often be running were more than 100km. For reference, the current 100km world running record sits at 6:09 for men and 6:33 for women set in 2018 and 2000 respectively. These records, while certainly extremely impressive and at the pinnacle of what the human body can achieve, were set with modern running shoes on sealed roads. Māori didn't have those luxuries, their races would more than likely be run bare foot or at most with some harakeke sandals, all cross country. Likely some rugged country at that. As a bit of an aside, New Zealand holds the womens world records for 1000 miles, which took approx 12 days and 14hrs set in 1991 and the 6 day running record at 883km set in 1990. That's 83mi and 147km a day, respectively. Anyway, one particular race that Māori ran in was the taupiri, an 80km run done in teams of two, where each team had to hold the neck of their partner the entire race. I'm not really sure how this would logistically work, it sounds rather difficult, or how it would be policed, I assume there was just an honour system. Either way, it sounds like a good spectator sport! In most of these races the runners would leave a stone or other object at the half way point before turning back to return to the starting line to complete the race. This was to show that they had made it to that point in case any one was doubtful that they hadn't done their run entirely legit. Again, these long distance races could involve carrying something heavy, like rocks, but this time they would carry them on their backs in harnesses rather than in their arms.

Aotearoa is a rather mountainous place with the Southern Alps running up the South Island and the North Island being dotted with volcanoes. Naturally, lots of Māori lived near these mountains, hills and other geographical phenomenon, which would most often contain walls of rock that had decent hand holds. So they would see who could climb them the fastest in a competition of strength and agility. These were mostly what they said on the tin and there isn't too much else to say about them other than competitors would sometimes try to distract or put off their opponent by throwing stuff at them, things like poi toa, small sticks or stones.

Poi toa were also used in their own contests as well. These differed from regular poi, which were usually filled with raupō or other soft plants, and instead contained rocks, meaning they were weighted and potentially used as a weapon of some kind. So they would probably be pretty brutal when being thrown at you when you were climbing a wall of rock with no harness! When used as the competition piece on their own though, one poi would usually be used by two people, one throwing and one catching. The idea was to throw and catch on the full as far as you could with the team who is able to do so over the largest distance being declared the winner. A slightly different version of this was to throw the poi toa straight up into the air and recite a karakia or some piece of verse as

fast as they could while their teammate tried to catch it. It isn't clear how this game was won but based on other games we will talk about later, it's possible that whoever made it through the most of the speech before the poi was caught successfully was the winner. One of the interesting things I found while looking into this is that I automatically had the picture in my head of the poi being caught by the ball or head part, known as the kī in Te Reo. That to me sounds like the most natural way to catch it as it's the heavy part that's shaped like a ball. However, Māori considered it poor form to catch the poi by the kī, potentially because catching pouch of rocks that's flying towards you isn't advised by doctors. Instead, they caught it by the rope that would be trailing behind it, which I think would be much harder and much more impressive!

Not all poi was as competitive though, some games could be just that, games that were more for fun than any serious competition. These could be quite simple, such as who could swing the most poi around without a meal out of it or throwing games similar to what we just talked about, sometimes with spinning the poi first before throwing it. Poi were also used in relay races where the poi would take the place of the modern baton, being passed between runners, with part of the race being that you had to keep the poi spinning the whole time. Occasionally obstacles would be placed on the ground to make the race a bit more interesting.

On the flip side, poi could be used in more complex games, such as a game called Ruru. Like before, this was a poi game that involved reciting something, in this case it was a verse of a song called Ka Kotahi Tī. This song was involved in a few different games that had the same reciting mechanic so it sounds like it was fairly well known at least in some areas of Aotearoa. The idea behind Ruru was to throw the poi up into the air as high as you can, once released they would begin reciting Ka Kotahi Tī, hopefully finishing before the poi came back to them and they had to catch it. If they couldn't complete it, they would throw the poi again and continue reciting the verse from where they left off. The objective was to complete the song in the least amount of throws possible. If you missed a catch though, you would have to start from the beginning while retaining your current count of throws. More modern versions of this, songs like Poi Ē are used.

Poi rākau is a game that actually doesn't involve poi at all, though it's possible that it did at some point. This game uses sticks or kōrari, which are the seed stalks of harakeke. Kōrari were considered to be quite good to use as practice weapons, even for rangatahi, so they could be adorned with fur or feathers. The idea of poi rākau was to have a group of people stand in a circle and one person at the centre of the circle. The person in the middle would be holding the kōrari and then throw it to someone in the circle, who would then pass it to either the person on their right or left, who in turn would pass it back to the person in the middle. The catch was that every one would sing a song or recite a chant as they clapped and stomped their feet and as such the kōrari was meant to be passed and thrown in time with the beat. Players were encouraged to assume a similar stance to that of when they wield a taiaha when they catch the kōrari before throwing it back, helping to build that muscle memory of how to handle a real weapon. A slight variation on the game would have players hold their hands behind their back until it was their turn to receive the kōrari, at which point they would obviously need to bring them forward, otherwise they would be hit in the face. More than one kōrari could also be used to make things more challenging, sometimes up to a dozen. Both these alterations served to help test and improve the players speed and agility.

As I mentioned before, kōrari were used by rangatahi to play fight with as they wouldn't cause any long lasting injuries, along with being good practice staffs for even more seasoned fighters. In general, kōrari took the place of taiaha in both games and practice fights given that the taiaha was an actual weapon that could do lethal damage as well as the fact that it was considered to be quite tapu. You wouldn't bring a glock to a water pistol fight, you know? A lot of games that used kōrari

were like poi rākau in that they involved throwing the stalk around to build muscle as well as get them comfortable with things flying around or towards them, something they would likely experience in battle.

Back to actual poi though, by Best's time, that is the early 20th century, he observed that poi was mostly a female only pastime. Though he kinda implies that men may have been more active in the realm of poi in the past, using it as a form of exercise and keeping their skills up for warfare. In case you are unfamiliar poi and have just spent the last few minutes wondering what the hell I've been on about, they are harakeke balls filled with raupō or some other soft plant (or rocks as mentioned before) attached to a flax string, occasionally adorned with kurī fur. They could also be made of a light wood but these were pretty rare. Later canvas would be used instead of harakeke. These are swung around by the string being held in one hand with the other hand being used to hit the poi against, causing it to bounce back in the opposite direction. When the poi hit the hand or arm, it makes a satisfying thud which can be used to create a rhythm, with multiple people swinging poi amplifying the effect and sometimes with singing. Poi performances were often done as an evening's entertainment, both in the sense of whānau/hapū settling in for a quiet night to watch the younguns perform or as more professional entertainment at a larger gathering. In the case of the latter, how well the performance went was thought to be indicative of the outcome of why everyone was gathered there in the first place. For example, if the reason was to negotiate a marriage and the performance went well, it would indicate that an accord would be struck between the two parties, and vice versa if say the performers was constantly out of time. In the past, like 100yrs or so ago, scholars thought that poi and its use in performance was linked to phallic worship. Even Best, who is not known for being the most culturally aware individual, acknowledges that there is no evidence for this and as such it is unlikely to be true. In general, it seems that poi weren't used for much spiritual purpose, unlike haka. Poi was mostly performed for entertainment or as a show of dexterity, with a little bit of divination type stuff thrown in there but that wasn't its primary purpose. Interestingly, Best mentions that Māori didn't seem to like poi or dancing in general without any singing or music, potentially cause they saw it as bit boring? He adds that this was a bit different to Europeans who I guess he was implying that they liked dancing for the sake of it and didn't need music to have a good time. However, in typical Elsdon Best fashion, he doesn't really expand on the idea.

Games were almost unlimited in their variety and were very much done just for fun or for a bit of friendly competition but most of them did encourage the use or development of a skill or to build up muscle. Kutikuti was a game that was about holding your breath, which is a pretty important skill to have if you were expected to be doing a lot of fishing or diving, as well as the more meditative aspect to it. However, this game didn't involve any water, in fact it didn't exactly entail holding your breath either in the sense that you just stood there not breathing at all. Like the game ruru, kutikuti was a recital game that also used Ka Kotahi Tī, though rangatahi would use Taumata-whakatangihaŋakoauauotamateaturipukakapikimaungahoronukupokaiwhenuakitanatahu, partially cause it was easier but also cause it also has some novelty value as the longest place name in Aotearoa! Whatever they decided to recite, the aim of the game was to say as much of it in one breath as possible whilst also doing some specific hand and arm gestures. These gestures would begin by opening and closing the hands before bending the arm in a particular movement, this bending movement representing the particular part of the song that they were reciting, chaining the movements together. Less skilled players would use a movement for a sentence or phrase whereas more skilled players would do a movement per word at a much faster pace.

Kutikuti is a bit unusual in that it isn't quite a physical game like the others we have discussed or at least it doesn't involve much movement. Karo on the other hand was basically all physical movement,

though I'd even partially hesitate to call karo a game. The way it worked was, well, people would just throw shit at you and you had to dodge it. Stuff like poi, kōrari, kī, toetoe, stones or apparently even kites were thrown at players with the hope that they would dodge them. To me this sounds more like some adults wanted to shut their rowdy teenagers up and relieve some stress at the same time so they just decided to hiff at them whatever they had lying around. Either way, this did have a benefit of improving the agility of the people having to dodge, as it would help in battle to be able to dodge projectiles and other weapons, especially since the Māori combat style relied a lot on being fleet of foot rather than just tanking damage.

Nonoke was also a very physical game in that it was essentially the Māori form of wrestling. Again, very popular sport for humanity, this one being 'You look tough. I bet I can kick your ass'. That's oversimplifying it quite a bit though, as there was a whole lot of tapu and tikanga around it all, which was collectively referred to as Rongo Mamau. Tohunga were the main group of people who kept this sport alive, keeping the knowledge of the rules and the various moves that would be used. What's really amazing is this information managed to be passed on despite the passing of the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907. The moves themselves were said to have been gifted from various atua and each move reflected the particular domain of the god that it was associated with. For example, Tāwhirimātea, atua of wind and storms, gifted throwing techniques such as grasping the legs to lift and throw, Tānemahuta, atua of the forests, gifted techniques that were performed in the upright position, such as a body grip or thrusting out of the leg whereas Rūamoko, god of volcanoes and earthquakes, gifted techniques that were performed on the ground. Nonoke was played by both men and women, sometimes with the two sexes going head to head. As far as we know, there wasn't too much consideration to what the sex of the person when deciding who they would go up against, what mattered was your ability. So if a man and a woman were thought to be evenly matched, there wouldn't be any issues in pitting them against each other. In saying that, both sexes tended to favour certain styles of wrestling, with women preferring chokes and holds that required more agility and men preferring more brute strength techniques. Like with many other sports of a similar nature, nonoke had a bunch of pre-match rituals that were followed. Some involved reciting a karakia to make yourself stronger or to weaken an opponent. This was partially practical or spiritual thing, where they believed they would receive aid from the gods but there was an element of trying to get into the head of the opponent as well and psych them out. Like with a lot of sports, the mental game is sometimes just as important as the physical one.

Next time, we will continue looking at games that require you to run around and be sweaty, such as hula hooping, rope swings and waka races. In particular we are going to take an in depth look at a very famous Māori ball game, kī-o-rahi.

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time!