

History of Archery

Archery is one of the oldest arts of ancient times, which is still practiced today. From its first development until the 1500s, the bow was man's constant companion and has been the most widely used of all weapons in recorded history. The bow allowed the prehistoric human to become the most efficient hunter on earth, providing him safety, food and raw materials such as bone, sinew and hide. From that time on, archery has played an important role in many of the world's civilizations.

Starting with the reign of William the Conqueror, the bow was England's principal weapon of national defense for several centuries. Around the year 1200, Genghis Khan and his Mongol hordes conquered much of the known world employing short, powerful bows. For Native Americans, archery was the means of subsistence and existence during the days of English and later American colonization. Finally, after the bow's replacement by firearms as a weapon of war, archery became a favored sport, thus securing its continuous practice throughout history.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, archery's importance as a cultural advance ranks with the development of speed and the art of making fire. The use of the bow appears in folklore from over 3000 years ago, although its invention probably predates that era.

The development of archery followed a course of key innovations by many historical cultures. About 3500 BC., Egyptians were using bows as tall as themselves. Their arrowheads, originally constructed of flint, were later made of bronze. Almost 2000 years later, the Assyrians developed the shorter recurve bow, which provided more power and easier handling. One central Asian clan, the Parthians, became famous for their ability to shoot backwards from a galloping horse, making the Parthian shot a meaningful phrase in our language. At about 1200 BCE, the Hittites developed the skill of shooting from moving chariots, and around 500 AD, the Romans, formerly second-rate archers, began to draw the arrow to the face rather than the chest, giving the shot more accuracy.

There are many legendary stories and heroes, which find their roots in archery. Homer's hero, Odysseus, reclaimed his wife and household upon his final return through his ability with his bow. The ancient Olympic games, tradition holds, were founded by an archer named Hercules. The Games featured archery with tethered doves as the targets. Target archery is also seen in the legends of Robin Hood and William Tell, which show the respect that the English had for great archers. In Japan, the practice of Kyudo and Yabusame raised archery from mere discipline to an art form and a philosophy of life.

Crossbows and the later developed longbow were the primary defense against massed cavalry. In the battles of Crecy and Agincourt in France, in the 14th century, English longbows overcame frightful odds against mounted, fully armoured knights to win the advantage. These longbows had draw weights of from 60 to 120 pounds, and were often used at ranges up to 250 yards. From 1330 to 1414, English kings banned all other sports because they diverted time from archery and a royal decree of 1363 required all

Englishmen to practice archery on Sundays and holidays. The advent of gunpowder led to a decline in popularity for archery as a tool of war, but it never completely died away, particularly among peasant poachers in the King's woods.

The National Archery Association of the United States had its origin as a result of just such a turn in our own country's history. After the Civil War, Confederate soldiers were not allowed to own firearms. Two brothers - J. Maurice and William H. Thompson - learned to hunt with the bow and arrow and became accomplished archers in Florida. Maurice's seminal book, "The Witchery of Archery", along with his poetry, continues to charm people to archery to the current day. They were both founding members of the NAA in 1879 at Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Archery tournaments, as we know them today, can also be traced back to England. Competitions were held as part of community festivals as early as the 17th century. By about 1600, three kinds of shooting were practiced in England, and they still survive in some form. In butt shooting, the ancestor of Olympic target archery, bowmen aimed at targets mounted on earthen butts at ranges of 100 to 140 yards. In clout shooting, the target was a piece of canvas, about 18 inches across, with a wooden peg in its center. Arrows are shot high into the air to descend on the target, which lies on the ground rather than being upright. Roving, the predecessor of modern field archery, grew out of casual hunting with bow and arrow. Archers are presented with targets of various shapes and sizes, simulating small animals, and they shoot at unknown ranges over rough ground, not a prepared course.

Archery became an official event in the modern Olympic Games in 1900 and was also featured in 1904, 1908 and 1920. International rules had not yet been developed, though, and each host country used its own rules and format. Because of the resulting confusion, the sport was eliminated from the Olympic program until 1972.

The Federation Internationale de Tir a l'Arc (FITA), was founded in 1931 as the international governing body for the sport of archery. The organization implemented standardized, international rules for competition, which allowed the first World Championship to be held that same year.

In 1972, after enough countries had adopted FITA's rules, archery was re-admitted to the Olympic Games. Since that time, technology has greatly advanced the equipment, and some competitive formats have become obsolete, but the sport of archery has essentially remained the same.