

Running in Hopi History and Culture

The Hopi people are known for running long distances at record speed. Throughout Native American history and culture, the tradition of running can be traced to mythical stories. The people believed that their ancestors and animals showed them how to run, and they understood that the mythical races helped to organize the world. In Hopi culture, the people ran for practical and ceremonial reasons. Several centuries ago, Hopis did not own cattle, sheep or burros, and they relied on their ability to hunt, which required them to incorporate running in Hopi society. Besides running for gaming purposes, Hopis ran in search of food. When there were no horses for transportation, running helped to cover great distances.

Moreover, Hopis organized races between neighboring villages. For example, runners from the villages of Orayvi and Walpi would often challenge one another to a race. In such cases, runners participated in races to prove their fortitude and fleetness of feet. Hopis also ran for physical reasons, as the people believed that running banished unhappiness, strengthened the body, and rejuvenated one's energy. Furthermore, according to Hopi oral tradition, young boys as well as men from Orayvi would assemble at a common place in the morning and run to Moenkopi to work in their fields.

In addition to the practical reasons for running, Hopis used running as a way to transport information. During the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, Hopi messengers ran to the nearby pueblos to prepare the people for an attack against the Spaniards. Hopi messengers were celebrated for their promptness in delivering messages. In 1903, George Wharton James gave a dollar to Charlie Talawepi of Orayvi to take a message to Keams Canyon. Talawepi ran the distance of seventy-two miles and brought back a reply in thirty-six hours.

In times of warfare against the Navajos, Hopi runners often ran to Navajo country to look for salvia, hair combings, and food in their enemy's hogans. When the runners brought back the elements, they buried them as bait and ignited a fire above the items so that the Navajo would be weakened before the approaching battle. In such instances, running had a supernatural purpose.

Hopi running also occurred in conjunction with several ceremonial events. While preparing your body to participate in races such as the Snake and Basket dances, praying as a group for rain and prosperity during these ceremonies serves as significant of giving from one's self and embodiment to the ceremonial events. Today, Hopis continue to practice ceremonial running. Therefore, Hopi running games are religious and secular in nature, as the people played these games to bring rain and cultivate crops.

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the Hopi primarily ran for spiritual and practical purposes. Beginning in the twentieth century, Hopi running became increasingly linked with physical fitness and American sports. One of the most famous Hopi runners was Louis Tewanima from Songòopavi who won the silver medal in the 10,000-meter race at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden. Another Hopi runner, Nicholas Quamawah, won the Long Beach – New York Marathon in 1927.

For more information about running in Hopi history and culture, see:

Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, “Hopi Footraces and American Marathons, 1912-1930,” American Quarterly, March 2010.

Peter Nabokov, *Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1987).

Victor Masayesva, Jr., (Director), *Paatuwaqatsi: Water, Land and Life* (2007, 60 min)