**Tudor Sports and Pastimes**

Sport and pastimes in [Tudor England](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) tended to mirror the likes and dislikes of the king or queen who reigned at this time. [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry8.htm) had a great love for certain sports, especially hunting, while his daughter, [Elizabeth](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm), liked pastimes which we would find very cruel such as bear-baiting and bear-gardens. However, not everyone was allowed to participate in sport.

In [Tudor England](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm), sport was heavily controlled by the government. The ordinary citizen rarely had a chance to take part in sport as the government considered it more important that they were fit enough to work. Most of their waking hours involved work of some sort so time for sport was a rarity. In the early years of the reign of [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) a law was passed in 1512 that banned the ordinary person from a whole range of games such as real tennis, as favoured by [Henry VII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry7.htm), cards, dice, bowls and skittles. It was only at [Christmas](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/tudor_christmas.htm)that rules were slightly relaxed in celebration of a religious holiday.

Football had been a popular sport for a number of years. It was very different in Tudor England when compared to the game today. There was no limit to the number of people on each side and the goalposts were set about one mile apart. The rules also allowed those playing to pick up and throw the ball as well as kick it into the opponent's net. These games were rough and many young men were hurt while playing it. These casualties were invariably those who might be needed for the army - young, fit men. In 1540, also in the reign of [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry7.htm), football was banned.

A writer in [Tudor](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) times described football thus:

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| **Football is more a fight than a game....sometimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometimes their legs.....football encourages envy and hatred....sometimes fighting, murder and a great loss of blood.** |

Such was the attempt to control the lives of the working class, that in 1542 even shuffleboard was banned - a game which we now call shove half-penny.

The general view was that the working class should spend their time at home or at work and that any form of games might get out of hand and the authorities might lose control of the population they controlled purely over a game. Dice, cards etc were banned as they might have encouraged gambling, which, in turn, might have got out of hand and caused trouble within a community.

However, there were no rules or regulations stopping the rich from taking part in what they saw as sport.

Jousting was a popular pastime enjoyed by the likes of [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry8.htm). Only the nobility were allowed to take part in jousting tournaments though [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry8.htm) had to retire from the sport as he was seriously injured in a jousting tournament in 1536. Noblemen also played real tennis - one of the oldest of all racquet sports. The law also only allowed the rich to hunt deer. [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry8.htm) was considered a skilled hunter and frequently spent as many as five hours a day in the saddle out hunting for deer. The poor were allowed to hunt hares and rabbit.

Certain 'sports' which are illegal now were very popular in [Tudor England](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm). Bear-baiting and cock- fighting were very popular. [Henry VIII](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/henry8.htm) and [Elizabeth I](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm) are both known to have attended bear-baiting events. A ring was built in the grounds of Whitehall Palace so that Tudor kings and queens could watch in comfort from a window. In 1585, Members of Parliament banned bear-baiting but [Elizabeth](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm)overruled them. Other 'sports' of Tudor England included blinded bears being whipped by a group of men and donkeys being attacked by a pack of dogs. [Elizabeth](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm)is said to have enjoyed both of these 'sports'.

A German visitor to Tudor England wrote the following:

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| **The bear cannot escape from them (the men) because of the chain; he defends himself with all his force and skill, throwing down all who come within reach.....and tearing the whips out of their hands and breaking them.** |

By the time of [Elizabeth's](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm)death in 1603, [Tudor England](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) still had bear-baiting, cock-fighting and what were known as bear-gardens. A bear-garden was where all manner of 'sports' involving animals took place surrounded by an arena from where the public watched - the poor standing and the rich sitting.

The [Tudors](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) attitude towards animals in 'sport' is at odds with us today but for all their cruelty to animals (though they would not have seen it as cruel), [Tudor England](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Tudors.htm) and especially the reign of [Elizabeth](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm) saw a great growth in the popularity of the theatre. The reign of [Elizabeth](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_i.htm) witnessed the career of William Shakespeare and the great popularity of the Globe Theatre in London. Ironically, the design of the Globe Theatre was based on a bear-pit in which everybody who attended could see what was going on. Such was the contradictions of Tudor England - the poor banned from playing football but allowed to attend bear-baiting fights while the country, though primarily London, saw the growth of the theatre and the plays of Shakespeare.

**Exercises**

1. **Look at the sports mentioned here. How have these sports and our attitudes towards sport changed today?**
2. **Write a list of rules for a school sportsday in 1558 (start of the reign of Elizabeth I).**