Could you have fun in the Middle Ages?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand how both rich and poor spent their spare time in the Middle Ages.
- To understand some of the major differences between sport today and sport long ago.

In the Middle Ages, ordinary people didn’t really have holidays. Instead, there were a number of feast days throughout the year, such as Easter Day, May Day, Midsummer’s Eve, Christmas and various Saints’ days. On these days, after going to a church service, they would be free to enjoy themselves. In fact, our word ‘holiday’ comes from the word ‘holy day’. And people generally made their own fun too, using home-made equipment with whatever they had to hand. Some of the sports and games were so popular that they are still enjoyed today.

What about the rich?

A rich noble may have gone to a tournament. This was a chance to take part in mock battles on horses and challenge another man to joust. He might go hunting in his forest, or stay in his manor house or castle to enjoy feasting or dancing. A group of acrobats or jugglers might entertain his guests. If the party got bored with the entertainers, they might play chess, draughts, cards, or throw dice.

In the Middle Ages a popular game for rich men was real tennis. Two players had to hit a wooden ball over a rope with a racquet. Sometimes the ball was hit so hard that players were killed by a ball hitting them on the head!

Do it yourself...

Whether you were rich or poor, you had to make your own fun in the Middle Ages. There were no cinemas or theatres to visit. You couldn’t even go to an organized, professional sports match. But people must have enjoyed their spare time because they didn’t get much of it. Holy days were rare, so ordinary people made sure that they made the most of them.

So how did ordinary people enjoy their holy days?

**Bowling**

Players would take it in turns to knock down as many skittles as they could with three balls.

**Conkers**

Became popular after 1066. The rules were simple – find a horse chestnut (or conker), drill a hole in it and thread it onto a piece of string. Then, taking turns, try and smash your opponent’s conker to bits.

**Mob football**

No rules, no referee and as many players as you can get. Whole villages would play each other, with the goals several miles apart.

**Ice skating**

People would strap sharpened bone to their feet to use as skates. Archaeologists have recently found a skeleton of a young boy with his skates still strapped on his feet. Thin ice perhaps?

**Archery**

England’s archers always needed archers. Boys had to practise from a very young age.

**Stoolball**

A young lady would sit on a stool and men would throw a ball at her. She would try to dodge the ball, perhaps using a bat to hit it away. If they hit her they got a kiss!

**Golf**

Using a few basic clubs, players would hit a leather ball stuffed with hair. Popular in Scotland and Holland by 1500.

**Shin hacking**

Two villagers would kick each other as hard as they could in the shins until one of them couldn’t take the pain and gave up.

**Bear baiting**

A bear would be chained to a post while dogs attacked it. People would bet on the result – would the dog or the bear win?

**Wrestling**

People loved all sorts of fighting games – the more blood the better.

**Cold hand**

A player would be blindfolded in front of a crowd and slapped by one of them. He or she would have to guess who hit them – and if they guessed correctly, it would be the ‘slapper’s’ turn to be blindfolded. This was sometimes called ‘blind man’s buff’ or ‘hot cockles’.

**Cock fighting**

Two birds attacked each other, sometimes with metal tied to their claws. People would bet on the result.

**MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?**

- Do you know the origins of the word ‘holiday’ and how some people spent their holidays in the Middle Ages?