



## Saratoga recognized as birthplace of Modern Atlatl Sport

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A special link to ancient history was celebrated in Saratoga, Wyo., on Saturday, May 21, 2011 in honor of the 30th anniversary of the Kids' World Atlatl Open and the teacher who was responsible for a new world-wide sport. Little did Rod Laird know that one of his middle school social studies courses about primitive technology and how it compared to modern technology, (including atlatls vs. the 30.06), would develop into a popular modern sport.



Early in the 1960s Laird watched archeologists uncovering a Clovis site in New Mexico and saw surviving traces of a weapon system which had killed a mammoth with a beautifully crafted Clovis point. This sparked a lifelong interest. What ancient hunting weapon had been responsible for such accuracy and power? How had Ice Age hunters brought down such a large animal?" Laird channeled his own ardent interest in Paleolithic cultures into teaching programs and tools adapted to both academic learning and students' personal skill development.

As one of the longest-lived technologies in human history, almost everybody's ancestors used atlatls at some time in the past. The only continent with no record of atlatl use is Africa, but it is quite possible that evidence simply has not been

discovered yet. The bow and arrow began replacing the atlatl around 1000 B.C. but atlatls continued to be used alongside bows into modern times in some areas such as the Arctic and Mexico.

According to Laird, atlatls were not the only topic. Thanks to a local ranch, equipment such as a back hoe, truck and haying equipment was made available to be compared to a shovel, a wagon, a scythe, etc. To fulfill the assignment of doing a project of early technology, some students made a fire-starting kit, some chose pottery, some constructed small looms and made weavings. etc., but a large number made atlatls!

There were tie-ins to many related topics including prehistoric peoples, plants, animals and climate change in science, and learning activities such as film making, creative writing, and speaking in front of the class or a camera.

Laird continued, "When spring 1981 rolled around we naturally had to share the projects, so we planned a big event. A student won the competition to name the event: 'The Primitive Technology Fair and Kids' World Open Atlatl Contest.' It was a huge success."

Adults in the community also became so interested in atlatls a "Big' World Open" was held during the summer and the best student shooters competed in a kid division. Contestants would hurl their spears with atlatl launchers, keeping a hold on the launching sticks, an invention from deep antiquity where the devices enabled spears to be propelled with supercharged force by producing increased leverage.

The next year the sixth graders competed directly with adults who had some experience. It wasn't even close. A student won!

After sending some of its members, including Leni Clubb, to the Wyoming competitions, the Colorado Archaeological Society started its own annual event at summer outings. The Wyoming summer event grew so big that it was moved to Casper, Wyo., but the all-student contest continued at Saratoga Middle School from 1981 to 1994.

As word and interest spread around the country and overseas, more contests were held world-wide, and the World Atlatl Association (WAA) was formed in 1987 under the guidance of Leni Clubb and the Colorado Archaeology Society. (See [www.WorldAtlatl.org](http://www.WorldAtlatl.org).) The WAA does not organize contests, but encourages members to attend local contests. The International Standard Accuracy Competition (ISAC) was invented by Lloyd Pine in 1996 to allow comparison of skill among atlatlists all over the world.

At that time Chuck Box was editor of the Saratoga Sun, and his stories were a big factor in the spread of atlatling. Laird's first atlatl book, written for kids but widely used by professionals, also spread the idea across the country and even overseas, but Saratoga was not always named so over time the sport's connection to the town and to Laird seemed to be forgotten.

The Wyoming Atlatl and Social Club has had one of the most active and continuous local atlatl groups and organizes numerous annual events. To see the North American Atlatl competition events for 2011, including Wyoming's, please click on the Calendar of Events link on WAA's website, [www.WorldAtlatl.org](http://www.WorldAtlatl.org).

UW Archaeology graduate Russell Richard was introduced to the atlatl by an archaeology professor in 1994, and by 1996 he began competing in atlatl contests. Richard has become very active, not only in the Wyoming club, but also in the WAA and is currently vice-president. His involvement in WAA has led him to travel to meet other members and compete in many of the 15 states and six countries.

Richard became interested in tracing the origins of the modern sport, which led him to Saratoga where he met Laird. Richard felt that the activity that inspired so many local students and adults in Saratoga and became the birthplace of a modern world-wide sport warranted special celebration for the 30th Anniversary of the original Kids World Atlatl Open.

Richard was one of the main organizers for the 30th anniversary competition for kids, amateur, and professional divisions held at Sandy Beach on the Saratoga Lake shore on Saturday morning. An afternoon symposium followed in the Platte Valley Community Center featuring six presenters discussing various atlatl topics.

Additional awards and presentations were given at the afternoon program and following an evening banquet at the Community Center. One highlight was the plaque presented by the World Atlatl Association to Rod Laird acknowledging his role in the origin of the modern atlatl sport when his Saratoga Middle School classroom learning activity went global.

Perhaps the most impressive award for Laird and all community residents was the beautiful trophy engraved with the words, "The World Atlatl Association wishes to acknowledge Saratoga, Wyoming, as the birthplace of the modern sport of friendly atlatl competition presented upon the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Kids' World Open Atlatl Contest at Saratoga, Wyoming. May 21, 2011." In addition, identical Bama portraits representing a hunter with his atlatl and spears were given by WAA to be displayed at both the Saratoga Museum and the Platte Valley Community Center.

The weekend event drew to a close Sunday morning at Saratoga Lake with a breakfast and more atlatl contests, but the renewed atlatl interest for older Saratoga residents and a younger generation will remain.

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