Look Keaw / Marble Shooting

Site of Documentation
Akha group, Tambon Mae Yao, Mueang District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

Description

*Look Kaew* is a competitive game that tests a player’s marble shooting skills. Popular with generations of Akha children living in the Chiang Rai province of Northern Thailand, players have to shoot and hit their opponent’s marbles if they are to win.

Who Plays?

This game can be played with a group of six or more children, aged between 8 and 12 years old.

Accessories/Equipment

This game requires children to bring their own marbles, usually bought from local shops and markets. Relatively inexpensive and easy to find, marbles are usually made from glass and can range in size, weight, colour and clarity.

Time and Place
A game of Look Kaew lasts between 5 and 15 minutes depending on the availability of time, the skill of the players and the amount of marbles the children have. At school, it is played during recess which limits time and shortens each game. Once school is out, a Look Kaew tournament can last much longer. The game requires a large area of smooth, dry ground that is approximately 4 square metres in size. In Asia, November through April are typically the best months to play, when days are warm and sunny.

Skill, Strategies and Qualities of a Good Player

The game requires the players to have excellent skill when using their fingers to shoot their marbles. Those who are good at judging distance, aiming and shooting the marble with accurate speed, will be the best players. In this version of Marble Shooting, players often try to throw their marble into the side of the game area that has the most marbles, to increase their chances of winning.

Popularity

Most popular among boys, the game is usually played during break time in the school playground. Many children also play and practice at home so they can improve their skills and win more marbles. The game encourages children to judge distances, formulate strategies and estimate probabilities.

History of the Game

The use of marbles in children’s games dates back hundreds of years and is widespread throughout many parts of the world. In Thailand, children used to play with Kong balls made from thumb sized balls of mud, which were dried out in the sun. Later on Kong balls were replaced by glass marbles. Look Kaew was played by older generations when they were young, much in the same way as children play it today.

Preparation

1. The players need to mark out the game area by drawing a large rectangle measuring 2 x 3 meters. They can do this by dragging a stick or stone in the dirt. The actual size of the game area depends on the number of players; the more players, the larger the required game area.

2. The rectangle then needs to be divided into half by drawing a line through the centre of it. These two areas are called the “Upper Field” and the “Lower Field”.
How is the Game Played?

**Step 1.** The game starts by determining the order of play. All the players must stand at one side of the rectangle and throw their marble into the game area, aiming for the central line. Where the marble lands determines which part of the game area the player will play in. For example, if the player’s marble falls in the "Upper Field", they will play the game from this half of the game area only. If a player's marble lands on the central line they can not only choose which half they play from but also get to start the game.
**Step 2.** The player whose marble is closest to the central line starts the game, while each of the remaining players have to use a ruler to measure the distance of their marble from the line. The player with the second closest marble plays second, the third closest plays third and so on. All the marbles should be measured, so each player knows when to play.
Step 3. Next, the player whose marble was the furthest from the line (and so was the last player) has to pick up their marble and once again throw it into the game area, aiming for their half of the game area. If they don’t aim accurately and the marble lands in the opposite field or rolls out of the game area, they can take another shot. The player gets three throws in total, if they fail all three, they are out the game and the game starter wins their marble. All the other players have to repeat the process. Again if they fail, the game starter wins their marble.
Step 4. Once all the players have completed their throws and the marbles are positioned across the game area, the game starter plays their turn. The game starter can shoot their marble from any position in their chosen half and try to hit one of their opponent's. If they hit (or 'eat') the marble, the player can keep the marble and take another shot.

Step 5. To hit or 'eat' an opponent's marble, players have to either directly hit it or if their marble falls within one hand's width from their target, they can pick it up, touch it to the marble and win the shot.
Step 6. Players are allowed to keep shooting until they miss – then it’s the next player’s turn. If a player has already eliminated the next player from the game during their turn, it is the turn of the next remaining player.

Rules

1. Players are only allowed to play in the half of the game area that their marble fell into during their first throw. The player whose marble lands on the central line gets to pick which side they play in.

2. If, as the game draws to a close, a player finds themselves to be the only marble in that half of the game area, they finish playing and wait for the next new round.

3. Any player that accidentally throws their marble out of the game area is eliminated from the game and loses their marble to the game starter.

4. If a player’s marble lands less than one hand’s width from another, it’s considered a hit and the player only has to pick up their marble and touch to the other to claim their prize.

5. If a player misses a shot, it’s the next player’s turn.

6. The game is complete as soon as all the marbles have been ‘eaten’.