

Jai-Alai: World's Fastest Ballgame

BY CARON CONWAY

The Guinness Book of World Records has declared it the world's fastest ballgame with a rock-hard ball traveling at speeds up to 180 miles per hour.

But there's much more than meets the eye to this high-speed sport called "jai alai."

AN EARLY game of handball played more than 4,000 years ago by the ancient Greeks developed jai-alai in the Basque country. It was here during the 1850s that a bored farmer in the French town of St. Pée-sur-Nivelle discovered he could hurl potatoes faster and longer using a narrow, scooped-out basket. Even today, a century and a half later, the majority of jai-alai players are Basque.

"Jai-alai" which means "merry festival" in the Basque language has been

played for centuries at religious festivals in the Basque provinces of France and Spain, and the presence of a jai-alai court in every Basque village is a testament to the cultural significance of the game.

AN ATTRACTION once touted as "the game of dodging death" and "ballet with bullets," jai-alai was an international obsession at the height of its popularity during the early part of the 20th century, with frontons in Spain, Italy, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Australia, Indonesia, China, Egypt and other places around the world. The first jai-alai fronton in the United States opened in 1924 at the site of Hialeah Race Course near Miami.

Jai-alai is played in a round-robin format, usually by eight players, or teams, which rotate every point, the point-winner remaining on the court. The

object of the game is to hurl the ball, using a curved basket-like apparatus, against the court front wall with so much speed and spin that an opponent is unable to catch or return it on the fly or on the first bounce.

POINTS ARE scored by the opposing team dropping, missing, holding or sending the ball out of bounds. The first player to score seven points (or nine points in Superfecta games) is the winner.

That's jai-alai in a nutshell, not hard to follow provided your eye stays on the speeding ball. But to be a true jai-alai *aficionado* (or fan), it's also helpful to know the game as the Basques themselves do.

Jai-alai is played on a *cancha*, or a three-sided court with one side open to the public and protected by a chain-link fence. *Pelotaris*, or players, use a goatskin-wrapped rubber *pelota*

(Spanish for "ball"). Slightly smaller than a baseball, it weighs only 4.5 ounces but can shatter bulletproof glass. The server has a choice of a lively ball, an average ball or a dead ball.

THE CURVED throwing and catching device known as a *cesta* ("basket") is made of Spanish chestnut and closely woven reeds, and is about 32 inches wide, leaving only a half-inch margin for error on either side of the ball.

A crucial piece of jai-alai equipment is a *casco*, or helmet, whose color distinguishes frontcourt players (yellow) from backcourt players (red). Before helmets were introduced in 1967, at least four players were fatally injured by speeding jai-alai balls, including one U.S. death in the early 1930s at the former Biscayne fronton.

DANIA JAI-ALAI

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Gaming

Dania Jai-Alai opened in 1953 as the second jai-alai fronton in the U.S., is a 22,000-square-foot facility offering "Poker, Ponies & Jai-Alai," with a 5,600-seat jai-alai arena, Simulcast Cellar (off-track betting begins at 11:30 a.m. daily) and Poker Cardroom featuring Texas Hold'em, Seven-Card Stud and Omaha games (\$1/\$2 games, with no pot limit; 12 p.m.-12 a.m., Tuesday through Sunday). Evening jai-alai starts at 7 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; Matinees: 12 p.m., Tuesday & Saturday, 1 p.m. Sunday. General jai-alai admission is \$1.50, includes self-parking and program. Reserved seating: \$2 to \$7. Patrons must be 18 years or older to wager or play poker.

Specials

Sunday Matinee: Hot dogs, sodas and beer for a buck apiece, with free Simulcast Cellar and Poker Cardroom admission after 5:30 p.m.

Simulcast Monday: Free admission to the Simulcast Cellar for full-card action from top U.S. tracks and frontons

Tuesday Ladies' Night: Free center orchestra seat and a program until 8 p.m.

99¢ Wednesdays: Center orchestra seat and a program are just 99¢, as are several menu items in the 2nd Floor Café, including chicken wings, hot dog and fries, fountain sodas, draft beer and frozen drinks.

Thursday Senior's Night: Free center orchestra seat self-parking and a program for "early birds" ages 55 and older until 8 p.m. on Thursdays

Seniors admitted free of charge at matinees on Tuesday, and before the start of the first game on Saturday and Sunday. Free general parking and a program with paid admission (excluding minors). Poker players receive free jai-alai admission.

Directions/Parking

On-site self-parking: Free; valet parking: \$3 (Nov. to May) From I-95/Turnpike: Exit Griffin Road east to Federal Hwy., turn right to stoplight at E. Dania Beach Blvd., east to Fronton (on left).

MARDI GRAS RACETRACK & GAMING CENTER

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Administration: Dan Adkins, Vice President



Live & Simulcast Racing

Formerly "Hollywood Greyhound Track", venue opened doors in December 1934 as "The Hollywood Kennel Club." Facility seats more than 4,000 with capacity of 25,000; parking lot accommodates 3,600-plus vehicles. As of July 1, live-racing season became year around, nightly beginning at 7:30 p.m.; matinees 12:30 p.m., Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Pari-mutuel wagering at greyhound, thoroughbred and harness races at major U. S. tracks offered daily beginning at 11:30 a.m. Hundreds of big-screen tvs throughout facility update races, major league sports and pay-per-view specials. events. No admission for live or simulcast racing.

Poker

Poker Room offers 7 Card Stud, Texas Hold'em and Omaha Hi-Lo games during all live racing. Note: under new rules, \$10 table limit no longer exists; play now permits three raises per round, \$2 maximum bet with \$20 buy-in. Free racing program to poker players. Tournaments include:

Mon-Wed-Fri. 7 p.m.: Multi-table, no-limit Texas Hold'em, \$45 buy-in.

Tues. & Thurs., 7 p.m. Multi-table Turbo no-limit Texas Hold'em, \$42 buy-in.

Sat. & Sun., 4:30 p.m. Multi-table, no-Limit Texas Hold'em, \$45 buy-in.

Single-Table Texas Hold'em Tournaments: Anytime with 10 players, \$42 buy-in.

Flea Market

Fri-Sat-Sun, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Features new and "garage sale" merchandise, fresh produce and food court in outdoor and covered areas. For Information, tel. 954-454-8666.

Directions/Parking

On-site self-parking: free; Valet, \$4.

From I-95: Exit Pembroke Road, east to entrance (on right).

From Turnpike: Exit Hollywood Blvd. east to I-95; I-95 south to Pembroke Road; east on Pembroke Road to track entrance on right.