



# Native American POWWOW

The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics  
Charles R. Eilber Physical Education Center  
Durham, North Carolina

## Welcome to the North Carolina School of Science and Math Powwow!

A powwow is part family reunion, part cultural celebration, part social gathering, and part educational opportunity. Powwows have evolved in "Indian Country" as an important way for Native American people to keep their traditions alive. Powwows also serve as a way of sharing the culture of Native American people with others. Powwows provide a time for original languages to be spoken, for old songs to be sung, for new songs to be sung, and for friendships to be made and strengthened.

Competition singing and dancing are popular at many powwows. At the Science and Math Powwow we replace the contests with the good times possible when like-minded people come together to learn about and celebrate the culture of the First People of this continent. This powwow is put on by Akwe:kon (pronounced A-quay-go), the Native American Club at the School of Science and Math. Akwe:kon is the Mohawk word for welcome. We welcome all of you and hope your time with us is both meaningful and enjoyable.

The NC School of Science and Mathematics  
1219 Broad Street  
Durham, NC 27705  
919-286-3366

# POWWOW

## Pointers

1. The circular arrangement of benches on the gym floor is the Dance Arena. The Dance Arena has four doorways, one at each of the Four Directions. Specific attributes and powers are associated with each of the directions: East, South, West, and North. Almost all tribes have ceremonies that pay respect to these Four Directions. Once the Dance Arena is blessed early in the day of the powwow, it is considered a very special place. It is a place for dancing, singing, and observances of important events in the lives of the powwow participants. The benches are the reserved seats for dancers in dance clothes. Only dancers and singers should enter the arena. Others may enter the arena if invited by the Master of Ceremonies, a dancer, or a person holding a special recognition.

2. Grand Entry is the first dance of a particular dance session. The Grand Entry song is usually sung by the Host Drum. All the dancers enter in a particular order determined by their dance category. The dancers are led in by veterans carrying both the American flag and the Indian flag. The Indian flag is a staff of eagle feathers that represents the original flag of this continent. The order of Grand Entry line up at our powwow is: Color Guard with flags, Chiefs/Elders, Princesses, Head Dancers, Men's Traditional, Men's Grass Dancers, Women's Traditional, Jingle Dress, Men's Fancy Dancers, Women's Shawl Dancers, Junior Divisions in this same order, and finally, Tiny Tots or the very youngest dancers.

3. The Master of Ceremonies is in charge of ordering the program and keeping a certain momentum to the powwow. He or she may give instructions to the dancers and drums. The MC will usually give a running narrative of what is happening in the arena and what is coming up next.

4. Special recognitions are called "specials" and include honor songs, memorial songs, give-aways, etc. All specials should be cleared with the host powwow committee in advance.

5. On some songs (Grand Entries, Flag Songs, Specials, Memorial Songs, etc.), the Master of Ceremonies will request that all people in attendance stand and remove their hats, if applicable. This is done as a sign of respect for what is about to happen.

6. The positions of Head Man and Head Lady Dancer are places of honor. The role of the Head Dancers is to lead off the dancing on every song. Exceptions would come for certain exhibition dances and at other times directed by the Master of Ceremonies. At some powwows, dancers do not start dancing until their Head Dancer passes by them in the arena. At our powwow, we observe the tradition that all can start dancing as soon as the Head Dancers are up and dancing.

7. Blanket Dances are dances held to honor or help particular people or groups. During these dances, a blanket is carried around the circle or sometimes placed in the circle. Donations are gathered in the blanket.

8. At our powwow we observe a "clockwise" or "sunwise" movement around the arena.

9. Many times members of the public ask questions regarding proper procedures for taking pictures of the dancers. First of all, photographers should stay outside the Dance Arena unless permission is obtained from the Master of Ceremonies. In general, no permission is necessary for photographs taken outside the arena of groups of dancers. Individual dancers should be asked if they would permit a photograph if they are to be featured in a photo. There may be times when it will be requested that no pictures be taken. These times might include the blessing of the arena before the powwow starts and during a feather pick-up, which is done to retrieve an eagle feather which has fallen to the floor. A dropped feather symbolizes a fallen warrior. The retrieval of this feather in the proper way is very important to Native American people.

# Dance Clothes

The attire that the dancers wear is referred to by some as dance clothes, by others as regalia. Seldom are these dance outfits called costumes. Indian people feel that costumes are things that are worn when someone wants to pretend to be something. Indian people at powwows are not pretending to be anything, they are being who they are. Sometimes Northern, Southern, and other terms are used in describing singing, dancing, and styles of dress at a powwow. As discussed earlier, Northern refers to Northern Plains (the Dakotas, Montana, Western Canada, etc.). Southern refers to Southern Plains (Oklahoma and the surrounding region). Woodland generally refers to the Ojibway or Anishinabe people of the Great Lakes Region. Southeastern refers to the Native American people on the Southeastern Coast, down to Florida, and over to Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi.



## Men's Traditional

Men's Traditional dancing may refer to any style of regalia that is inspired by the style of ceremonial clothes worn back in the 1800's or before. Usually, Northern style dancers wear eagle feather bustles on their backs, tied at the waist. These bustles are simple in their decoration, using the natural beauty of the feathers maximum effect. This style of dancing is typically less energetic than Fancy Dance, but it has its own kind of intense energy. Dancers may imitate the movements of tracking an animal, telling a

story of battle, or the dancer may be dancing for the sheer joy of dancing. Some dancers in this category have evolved into a new style of dancing called Contemporary Oldstyle. Here, more modern materials may be used, more decoration is employed, but still the style hearkens back to the old days.



## Straight Dance

This style refers to Southern Traditional dancing and comes from several of the tribes that were forced to settle in Indian Territory or what we now know as the state of Oklahoma. Tribes that particularly embrace this style of dress are the Ponca, Kiowa, Osage, Ojibwa, Pawnee, and in more modern times, the Comanche. These dancers typically do not wear bustles, but instead, wear long trailers down their backs made from either otter skins or silver "hairplates". The Straight Dance has directly evolved from warrior societies that were prominent in the 1800's. These societies looked after the wellbeing of the people and promoted values associated with good living. Many say that the name Straight Dance comes from the dignified posture of these dances, but these dancers execute elaborate moves as well.



## Men's Fancy Dance

Fancy dancing originated in Oklahoma in the 1920's and 30's. Originally, this style of dancing was characterized by elaborate, circular "fluffy" bustles tied to the back, neck, arms, and even knees. This has evolved to the use of two "U-shaped" bustles, one tied at the waist and one higher on the shoulders. Dried hackle feathers from rosters are used to decorate the feathers in these bustles. The beadwork worn with these outfits is often quite elaborate. Dancers often use their artistic expression to add to their outfits. You can never know what you might see! The style of dancing is unlimited and athletic: spins, turns, hops, and splits are traits with these dancers.



## Women's Traditional

The regalia worn by women, whether Northern or Southern, is something to behold! The dance style is graceful and flowing. Among the different varieties are buckskin and cloth dresses. Women in this category carry a shawl over their arm, sometimes decorated with ribbonwork and applique patterns.

## Jingle Dress

Jingle Dress dancers make up a sub-set of Women's Traditional. This dance traces its origin to a society of women dancers from the Anishinabe people. This society danced (and, in some cases, still does to this day) for the health of their people. The jingles that adorn these cloth dresses are often made from the lids of snuff cans. Indian people have always been masters of using the materials available to them! When these dancers dance, they offer a unique sound to the Dance Arena.





## Shawl Dance

Shawl Dance is the women's variety of fancy dancing. It is a comparatively new style having been around only for a few decades. Some call this "butterfly" dancing because of the appearance of the shawl that is worn across the back and around the shoulders of this style dancer. Others link this term to a story of a beautiful butterfly emerging from a cocoon after mourning for her mate killed in a battle. The most evident aspect of this style of dancing is the fancy footwork and the spins that are combined with elegance and grace.



## Grass Dance

Grass Dancing is sometimes placed under Men's Traditional and sometimes under Men's Fancy. It has links to both. Grass Dancing evolved from an old style of dancing on the Northern Plains. Some say that this style got its name from the dancers that were sent out to dance the grass down before a ceremonial dance was to begin. Others trace the origin to warrior societies where the dancers tied braids of sweetgrass to their belts. This evolved to wearing braids of sweetgrass at the top of dance bustles worn on the back. Sweetgrass is used by many Native Americans for purposes associated with purification and protection. Some say it is braided to represent the hair of Mother Earth. Grass dancers today wear a modern outfit decorated with colorful yarn and/or ribbons. The movement of these dancers can often be imagined to resemble tall grass swaying in the wind. These dancers are known for the flexibility of their bodies and for their fancy footwork.



## The Singers and the Drums

The singers are regarded caretakers of the old songs and the composers of new songs that are linked to the traditions of the past. Without the singers, there would be no music, and without the music, there would be no dance. The position of singer brings with it much responsibility. Not only are the singers responsible for keeping the traditions of the music alive, they assure that the Drums are properly cared for. To many Native Americans, the Drum is said to represent the heartbeat of the People. It is said that, as long as the Drum sounds its voice, Indian people will continue to live on this Earth. When the Drum ceases to sound, Indian people will no longer exist.

To some people, all Indian singing sounds alike. But if one listens carefully, each of the songs has a distinct and complex melody held together by a traditional structure learned at the Drum.

Most of the songs sung at powwows today are intertribal songs that are shared among people of all tribes through celebrations, family gatherings, Indian radio stations, cassette tapes, and CD's. In modern powwow culture, singing is usually categorized as Northern or Southern. Northern music traces its origin to the Northern Plains of the United States and, today, is sung in a higher register. Honor beats are placed in the second chorus of the song. Southern music traces its origin to the Southern Plains of our country, particularly Oklahoma and the surrounding region. Southern music is typically lower in its register and loud beats are placed between the choruses. Usually, at the Science and Math Powwow, there is a mix of both Northern and Southern Drums.