



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A young competitor participates in the six-and-younger category at the 23rd Annual Wildhorse Pow Wow at Wildhorse Resort & Casino.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A toddler checks out a dancer's regalia during the Grand Entry at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Nacho Martinez, of Arizona, waits his turn to compete at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.

Power of the powwow

Rhythm of drum provides heartbeat

By KATHY ANEY
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Powwow. The word evokes a sensory smorgasbord. Swirling dancers adorned with feathers, beads, bustles, ribbons, porcupine quills, shells, fringe, metal cones and buckskin. A cacophony of colors ranging from bright traditional tones to modern fluorescents. Smells of sweetgrass, sage and fry bread. The rhythmic beat of the drum.

The drumbeat, according to anyone who knows powwow, is the heartbeat. Without it, the dancers couldn't dance. The effort would be as futile as cars without engines or knives without blades.

More than 300 dancers and dozens of drummers worked together during the three days of last weekend's Wildhorse Pow Wow on the back lawn of the Wildhorse Resort & Casino. Competitors represented multiple tribes and traditions, but all embraced the power of the powwow.

The roots go back many generations. Dances are infused with traditional stories and symbols of their ancient roots.

The men's grass dance was once performed by warriors returning from a hunt. Acting out the stories of their exploits, the dancers use fluid movement to keep feathers and ribbons waving like grass in the wind.

In the shawl dance, women use elegant shawls to simulate butterfly wings. The footwork is light and fast. Squint a little and a talented dancer may look like she is floating.

Participants in the men's fancy dance are flamboyant in their flashy regalia such as porcupine roaches, feather bustles, angora anklets, sheep bells and feathers on spinners.

Jingle dancers wear dresses adorned with dozens of metal cones, which bump together in time with the drum.

Categories include dances for children, men, women and even couples (the sweetheart dance).

The traditions of powwow run deep inside jingle dancer Simone Lefthand. On Sunday, the Stoney Nakoda Sioux woman stood in the shade, her dancing done, her jingle dress draped over a nearby lawn chair. The 29-year-old said she attended her first powwow as a babe in arms and now travels from one to another during the summer season. The week prior to Wildhorse, she danced at the Muckle-shoot Powwow in Auburn, Washington. This weekend, she competes in Browning, Montana.

The jingle dance is a healing dance, Lefthand said — it's meant to heal those who are sick. During competition, she feels lightness, tinged with purpose and emotion.

"I feel relaxed, but also a little emotional," said the Yakima resident. "I dance for people who can't dance."

To Lefthand, powwow means family and friends. Her three daughters dance, too. She grew up in Alberta, Canada, where her father participated in powwows as a singer.

"I grew up around the drum," she said.

Sitting near Lefthand in a lawn chair was her boyfriend, Leslie Nicholas II, 27, a drummer from the Passamaquoddy tribe in Maine. He said the drumbeat is powerful and uplifting, the driver of the entire powwow. He said each drum group has an individual style and singers who blend their voices into one.

"You must harmonize," the drummer said. "You don't try and outlast each other."

Competition between drum groups gets fierce, but it never gets personal.

"There's competitiveness," Nicholas said, "but after that's done, people go back to being friends."

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Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A tiny dancer participates last weekend in the six-and-younger category of the 23rd Annual Wildhorse Pow Wow at Wildhorse Resort & Casino.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A drum group called Young Spirit performs last weekend at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A competitor participates in the grand entry of the 23rd Annual Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A couple participates in the sweetheart dance at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A dancer holds her feather fan high during competition at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A couple participates in the sweetheart dance at the Wildhorse Pow Wow.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
A dancer competes at the Wildhorse Pow Wow at Wildhorse Resort & Casino.