



Powwow 101 – Quick Reference Sheet

This reference sheet is a distilled version of the larger Powwow 101 booklet, a more thorough document that was made in consultation with different community members in Saskatoon. All cultures and communities are different within Saskatchewan and elders have different beliefs, so there may be some discrepancies between personal teachings and what is portrayed here. This is meant to be a general tool for people not familiar with powwows, not a substitution for the knowledge of elders and Indigenous knowledge keepers. The powwow committee does not mean any disrespect to beliefs or practices not fully represented here or in the Powwow 101 booklet.

Powwow Basics

Background

Songs have been a primary medium for facilitating prayer, giving thanks and socializing within First Nations cultures. As such, song and dance play an integral role in demonstrating hospitality to visitors and celebrating events of significance. These traditions of First Nations people are the roots of the contemporary powwows of today.

The Drum

The drum has been fundamental in accompanying First Nations songs. The drum carries the heartbeat of all First Nations peoples and of Mother Earth, thus calling the nations together. As with many things in First Nations cultures, the drum is used to bring balance and rejuvenation to a person through their participation in dancing, singing or listening to the heartbeat.

Dancing

Each powwow committee establishes its own rules based upon First Nations traditions and the evolving norms for competition powwows. Today most powwows set their categories based on five different age groups and seven styles of dance: women's traditional, women's jingle, women's fancy, men's traditional, men's grass, men's fancy and men's chicken. Dancers are awarded points for participation in grand entries, intertribal dances and contest performances.

Powwow Protocols

Grand Entry

The grand entry is the gala parade of the dignitaries and dancers that opens each session of a powwow.

- ✓ *As a demonstration of respect, spectators are expected to stand during the grand entry, flag and victory songs, and the invocation.*

The grand entry is led by dancers carrying the eagle staffs and the flags. A military guard, which may be comprised of veterans, those in active military duty, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and community police, follows the flag bearers. They are followed by the dignitaries, such as a Chief and Council, visiting officials from First Nations, provincial or federal governments, special guests and the powwow organizers.

- ✓ *The dancers and dignitaries dance in a clockwise path around the dancing area until all have entered the dancing area.*

When all have entered the dancing area the grand entry song is concluded and another singing group is called upon to sing the flag song, which is comparable to the national anthem. After this, an elder is called upon to address the people and provide a prayer. The eagle staff and flags are then posted, during which time the flag bearers and military guard are introduced.

- ✓ *Once the eagle staff and flags have been posted, the spectators may be seated.*

Following the posting of the flags the dignitaries are introduced. At the opening session of a powwow, the Chief of the host First Nation or chairperson of the hosting organization gives a welcoming address.

Intertribal Dances

At competition powwows, rounds of intertribal dancing are done before the contest begins and between contest categories—this sets the mood and tempo for the session and provides an opportunity for the dancers to warm up. Intertribal dancing is a time for all to enjoy the spirit of song and dance.

- ✓ *Everyone, including the spectators, are encouraged to dance and are free to dance their own style. You do not need to be in regalia to join an intertribal dance. On occasion, the arena director may call for a specific type of dance such as the sneak up, crow hop, round dance or two step.*

Honour Songs

Honour songs are sung to demonstrate respect for an individual or group to recognize their accomplishments, return from military service, birthday or anniversary. The individual or group requesting the honour song will select a drum group to sing the song and serve them with the appropriate protocol.

- ✓ *Tobacco should be offered to the powwow committee or Arena Director and to the singing group when requesting an honour song. After the song and explanation of why the song was requested, a monetary gift should be given to the singing group and to the powwow committee.*

During the honour song, those being recognized will dance around the dancing area clockwise.

- ✓ *During the honour song the crowd is expected to stand in demonstration of respect. To further demonstrate respect, they may go out into the dancing area to shake hands with the family or group.*

Donations

You may make a donation to either the powwow committee, to a dancer or to the singers.

- ✓ *Donations may be made at the announcers stand. The announcer will announce your donation and call forward those who you are gifting so they can shake your hand and thank you.*

Feather Pick Up

If an eagle feather is dropped during the dancing, a special ceremony is held to retrieve the fallen eagle feather, the specifics of which differ amongst First Nations.

- ✓ *During a feather pick up ceremony, the crowd is expected to stand and remove their hats or caps. Picture taking—with still or video cameras—is not permitted.*

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *When do I stand or take off my hat during a powwow?*

If you are able to, you should stand during the grand entry, flag and veteran songs, honour songs, opening prayers and the feather pick up ceremony. Please listen closely to the Masters of Ceremonies as they will let you know when you should stand.

2. *Can I take photos or video footage at a powwow?*

Yes, except for during a feather pick up ceremony. However, it is expected that if you are going to use the pictures or footage for something more than your personal enjoyment, that you do get proper permission. If you are planning to use individual shots, get the permission of the individual dancer.

3. *Why do veterans get special treatment at a powwow?*

Veterans are respected at powwows due to their contributions and military service. As such, veterans are included in the grand entry and are often called upon to participate in a feather pick up ceremony.

4. *How do I demonstrate respect to an elder?*

In First Nations cultures there is a high level of respect shown to elders. They have gained wisdom through their experiences and the knowledge that they have acquired. Please remember to show the appropriate respect and provide assistance as needed. Additionally, please help all older persons or those with limited mobility.

5. *Can I join in and dance with the powwow dancers?*

The Masters of Ceremonies will let you know when an intertribal dance round is happening. If you see dancers with many different regalia dancing, it is likely an intertribal dance.

6. *Where can I sit at a powwow?*

At many powwows there will be designated places for spectators to sit such as bleachers and chairs. Many people bring their own chairs as there is usually limited seating. Please ensure that you are far enough away from the drums to allow judges, arena staff, and the singers to move around the drum. If you see a blanket or regalia placed over chairs, it should be assumed that the spot is reserved.