

# THE GAME OF POGO

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## History

*Pogo-Ogo-No-Logo*, abbreviated *Pogo*, is the name of a folk playground game invented, as far as I know, by a group of fifth and sixth grade students at North Davis Elementary School in Davis, California. When I attended school there in the late 1970's, Pogo was the most beloved game played on our school playground, and many students spent recess after recess playing Pogo and little else. I played for so many years that I never forgot the rules, and at thirty-five, I can still hit a *skizzer* to *stick* someone.

When I began to work in Seattle schools in 1994, I found that many of the foursquare courts at Seattle schools remained empty all year, and I felt it was time to introduce a game that would keep those asphalt playfields alive and used.

## Problems with Foursquare

*Foursquare*, in my opinion, is a game that's easy to cheat in, because it involves hitting a ball open-handed, and many players will quickly begin to hold or cradle the ball, which is a fuzzy line between hitting and holding. The game of foursquare moves slowly because the ball is *lobbed*. For these two reasons, it has not survived as a popular playground game today.

## Pogo's advantages over Foursquare

In Pogo, a high-speed variation of foursquare, the ball moves at very high speeds. Also, since players may only hit the ball with both hands clasped in a *hold*, the game requires great skill and yet even the most skilled players have difficulty, at times, directing the ball. The game is enjoyable for ages six and up, and is a challenge to gross-motor coordination skills. Finally, unlike foursquare, it's much more difficult to cheat in *Pogo*.

## Pogo Lives!

For the reasons mentioned above, I introduced Pogo to four sixth grade students at AEII school (now Thornton Creek Elementary) in Seattle during the spring of 1994. Those four taught more students to play, and within a year all of the foursquare courts were filled with pogo players. I also taught students at Whitworth Elementary and at Salmon Bay School in Seattle, where I introduced a classes of elementary school students to Pogo in 2001. Then in 2004 in California, I taught several students attending Willow Creek Academy in Sausalito how to play.

I had returned to North Davis Elementary School on several occasions in the 1990's, and noticed that the old foursquare courts where I used to play pogo were now vacant during recesses. Our classic game of Pogo seemed to be dead and forgotten in Davis—at least at my old elementary school. But during a recent 2008 trip to Davis, I saw three children playing what appeared to be a two-squared Pogo game in a Davis park. After watching the kids play for several minutes, I asked them what they called the game they were playing. "Pogo," they said. I was thrilled that even the name had not changed, and got in line to play. The kids were all dumbfounded, and a father of one of the kids watching asked in disbelief, "You know how to play this game?! I thought only kids understood it!" That a folk playground game could last in a town—with terminology, rules, and dynamics transmitted from student to student over the course of thirty years—is the surest testimony to a game's quality and playability.

I hope that many more kids (and adults) try the game and persevere long enough to master some of the more challenging maneuvers and strategies. It takes a week or so of daily play to get the swing of it, and a couple of months of daily practice to get good at hitting and/or returning a good *skizzer*. As long as everyone sticks to the rules and plays honorably, Pogo is an incredibly fun playground game.

# POGO • OFFICIAL RULES

## The Court

Pogo may be played as a two-square game or a four-square game, in various sized courts. Students in Seattle usually prefer the larger, circular courts to the smaller, square ones, but either court will do. I've even played Pogo on a tennis court without the net!

## The Ball

Any standard rubber foursquare or kickball ball with a heavy, slightly textured skin will do. Beach balls are too light and don't allow for a fast game. Generally, larger balls will produce a slower game, and therefore a game that's easier to play. The best games, in my opinion, are played with a small, 10" diameter, ball. These balls are more difficult to hit, yet allow for a more versatile and a much faster game. Also, it's easier to tell which square a small ball landed in than it is with a large ball.

## The Players

As in foursquare, one player stands in each of the four squares. In a two-player game, only two squares are used: one for each player. One square is called the *server's square*. Usually this is square number "one" on a numbered court.

## The Object

Players play against each other, for themselves, to try to become the server. The server, in turn, tries to remain in the game as the server for as long as possible.

## The Serve

The server begins by holding the ball and tossing it down into her own square so that it bounces—or will bounce—in another square. *Unlike all other plays, the server should not bounce the ball and hit it with closed hands while serving.*

The server has many advantages in serving:

1. She may choose any player to serve to without *calling* anything.
2. She may call, “decent” before serving the ball. This means that the player she serves it to must return the ball to the server in a straightforward, “decent” manner. This allows the server to then *stick* any player the server chooses. If the server is unsatisfied with the return, she may choose another player to serve it to with a “decent,” until she has exhausted all three other players. At this point, she may serve with a different call.
3. She may call, “no backs” before serving the ball. This means that the player she serves the ball to may not return the ball to the server, but must instead hit the ball to another player.

## No Outs on Serves

If the player receiving the serve gets *stuck* (out), while attempting to return or play on the serve, the serve must be restarted. The server, in this case, may choose to serve to a different player. After the player served to successfully hits the serve, if the server attempts to hit the ball if it is returned to the server, the server may get out if her attempt fails.

## The Holds

After the serve, all players must hit the ball with both hands held together firmly in a *hold*. Players have different *holds*, and there’s no “right way” to do it. Names of hand holds include the *Cyrus*, the *Elbert*, the *Rafi*, and *Craig’s Hold*. What they all have in common is that both hands are held together, and contact with the

ball is made with the outside edge of both hands, just below the pinky finger. Any player who hits the ball with one hand—even if their hand is in a closed fist—is out. *Exception: if the player has only one hand or one hand is injured (i.e. in a cast or sling), exceptions must be made for that player.*

## The Play

Players must hit the ball so that it bounces in their square once after they hit it, and then proceeds into another player's square. They may let the ball bounce once in their square *before* they hit it, although this is not required; a player may also hit the ball before it bounces in their square provided that *after* they hit it, it bounces once in their square.

Players may step outside their squares—and even inside other players' squares—to hit or return balls.

## Getting Stuck: Outs

*Getting Stuck*—pogo lingo for getting out—can happen in many ways. Here is a list of ways that players get *stuck*:

- 1) *Double Bounce*: The ball bounces twice in their square at any time during play.
- 2) *Logo*: The player hits the ball into another square before it bounces in their own square.
- 3) *Yogo*: The player hits the ball outside their own square (such as behind their square) before it accurately bounces into another player's square.
- 4) *Double Hit*: The player hits the ball twice, using any part of the body.
- 5) *Overshoot*: The player hits the ball correctly into their own square, but it fails to bounce into another player's square, and instead bounces out of the court.
- 6) *Trap*: The player gets the ball trapped between their hands and the ground, so that the ball stops altogether.

- 7) *Off the Body*: The player used another part of their body to hit the ball rather than one hand.
- 8) *Shwisher*: The player fails to hit the ball.
- 9) *One-hander*: The player hits the ball back using only one hand, not the required two pursed together.

When a player is *stuck*, they leave the court at once and may stand in the back of the line to enter at square four. The first person waiting in line must then enter the game into square four, to the server's right. The players then all advance to displace the player who was *stuck*. Movement advances counter-clockwise toward the server's square. The server may not advance. Rather, they may either get *stuck* and leave the court, or remain in the server's position. If the server gets *stuck*, all of the players remaining advance. This is why it advantages all the other players to try to *stick* the server.

## Advanced Hits

Certain hits have names, and can be used to *stick* other players.

- 1) *Skizzer*: This is the most difficult hit to master, but also the most difficult hit to return. A *skizzer* can be created only when the ball is very low to the ground when it is hit—when it must be hit very hard with a side-arm hit, with much horizontal force. If the ball effectively makes a distinctive “skkkkizzz” sound as it travels to another square—without *double bouncing* or *logoing*—then it's a *skizzer*. To return a *skizzer*, you'll have to be ready when it comes, with your body low to the ground and your hands to one side of your body. Additionally, you'll have to make an effort not to *logo* or *trap* the ball if you hit it. Good luck!
- 2) *Skyrocket* (also called a *watertower*): The *skyrocket* is hit with a forceful downward motion, which rockets the ball above the players' heads and then into a square. They are almost impossible to return (without *logoing*) on the way down, so the only way to return a *skyrocket* is to hit it after it bounces in your square. This, however, can also be challenging, because the ball heads skyward quite quickly. Some *skyrockets* will *overshoot*. An

experienced player will sense this, back out of the way, and let the ball *overshoot* before attempting to return it, thus letting the player who attempted the *skyrocket* get out.

- 3) *Cheap*: A *cheap* or a *cheapshot* is simply a name for a hit that places the ball right in the corner of another player's square, making it difficult for that player to hit the ball.

## Do-overs

*Do-overs* are plays that require the server to begin again, and restart the play with the same players in each square. In pogo, two events always require a do-over.

- 1) *Liners are do-overs*: If the ball apparently landed on a line, and the question arises about whose square the ball is in, the play is done over.
- 2) *Interference*: If other players or people in line bump or accidentally interfere with the game, or make it difficult for a player to reach or hit the ball, "*interference*" is called, and the play is done over.

## Honor, Integrity, and the Honor System

Pogo is a game of honor. If you know you're out, admit it gracefully and give someone in line a chance to play. If you think you might be out, ask others for their perspective. The more honestly other people see that you are acting, the more they will respect and value your opinion. If you lie or call the outcomes of the game differently than you actually saw them to form alliances with other people, you're not playing Pogo: you're playing power games.

## Refereeing Pogo

During play, the server acts as the referee when a player in the other three squares cannot determine if he or she is out. If the server makes a call that a

player is out and the entire line disagrees with the call, then the play is done over. If the server didn't see the play, the call will go to the line instead.

When another player or the server herself questions whether the *server* is out, the people in line referee. Anyone honestly seeing the play may vote. A fist with an outstretched thumb indicates that they feel the server is out, an okay sign indicates a vote that the server is not out, and a hand held flat in the vertical position (like a handshake) indicates that it's a liner or other do-over. Anyone in line who did not see may not vote. If the majority of the people in line vote that the server is out, the server must give her position to the person in square number two, and everyone else advances. If the majority of the line votes that the server is not out, or the out votes tie the other votes, it's a do-over, and play begins again. The line is called to vote when any player stops play because they believe that the server is out or when the server disputes or questions whether she is out. The line may also vote spontaneously when it looks as if the server is out.

## Play-ons

Play-ons are a common event in Pogo: when someone is out—particularly by *logoing* or *yogoing*, another player may hit the ball to continue play before the play actually stops. It is the server and the line's responsibility to call "out!" and indicate with votes where they stand after a player stops play by holding the ball. Any player may stop the play and hold the ball, but if the server does not believe that player is out, they are not out, and play is done-over. *Just because another player "played on it" does not invalidate the out.* The player that is out is still out, even if the ball was played-on four or more times before play was stopped. Moreover, if a second player gets out after playing-on another player's out, this second person is not actually out. The original player who was out is out, and the second player stays in for the next serve. That's why it's important to hold the ball after it looks that someone is out.

## Bending the Rules: A Word of Caution

Due to its high speed competitive nature, Pogo can quickly degenerate into a venue for excluding some players and creating alliances with others. Alliances in Pogo are discouraged, since it is intrinsically a one-person-stand-three game. But servers who bend, alter, add, change, or overlook certain rules may do this to create a new game that serves their political and social interests. In other words, they're most often *bending* to get certain people to stay or be their friends.

Refuse to play with such servers who change the rules. Whether they know it or not, they are usually trying to exclude people. The term for such servers are *benders*. What would happen to other official competitive sports such as baseball, basketball, football, and soccer if a player suddenly announced that "the rules are changing"? They'd be thrown out of the game! If a server—or any other player—changes the rules, kindly remind them that they're *bending*.

Granted, new games may be created by changing and adapting rules. Pogo is an adaptation that evolved from foursquare. But when servers create or call rules that give only themselves and their friends advantages, they're being exclusive. If you want to create a new original game, do—but don't destroy years of work refining the rules of Pogo because you want to give yourself or your friends advantages and leave other people out of playing the game.

These rules of Pogo work. They've been play-tested since 1979. If you want to play a fast-paced, high-speed playground game that will keep your heart pumping and your feet sidestepping, keep to the rules of the game, and if you and your playmates can be good sports, you'll soon master the game of Pogo.

Have fun and play honorably,  
Craig Coss

## FOUR POGO HAND HOLDS

Cyrus Style



Hands parallel. Hit ball under pinkies.

Elbert Style



Fingers interlocked.

Rafi Style



Hands clasped together.

Craig Style



Cross between Cyrus and Rafi:  
clasped hands twisted slightly parallel.