



WHAT IS KUBB?

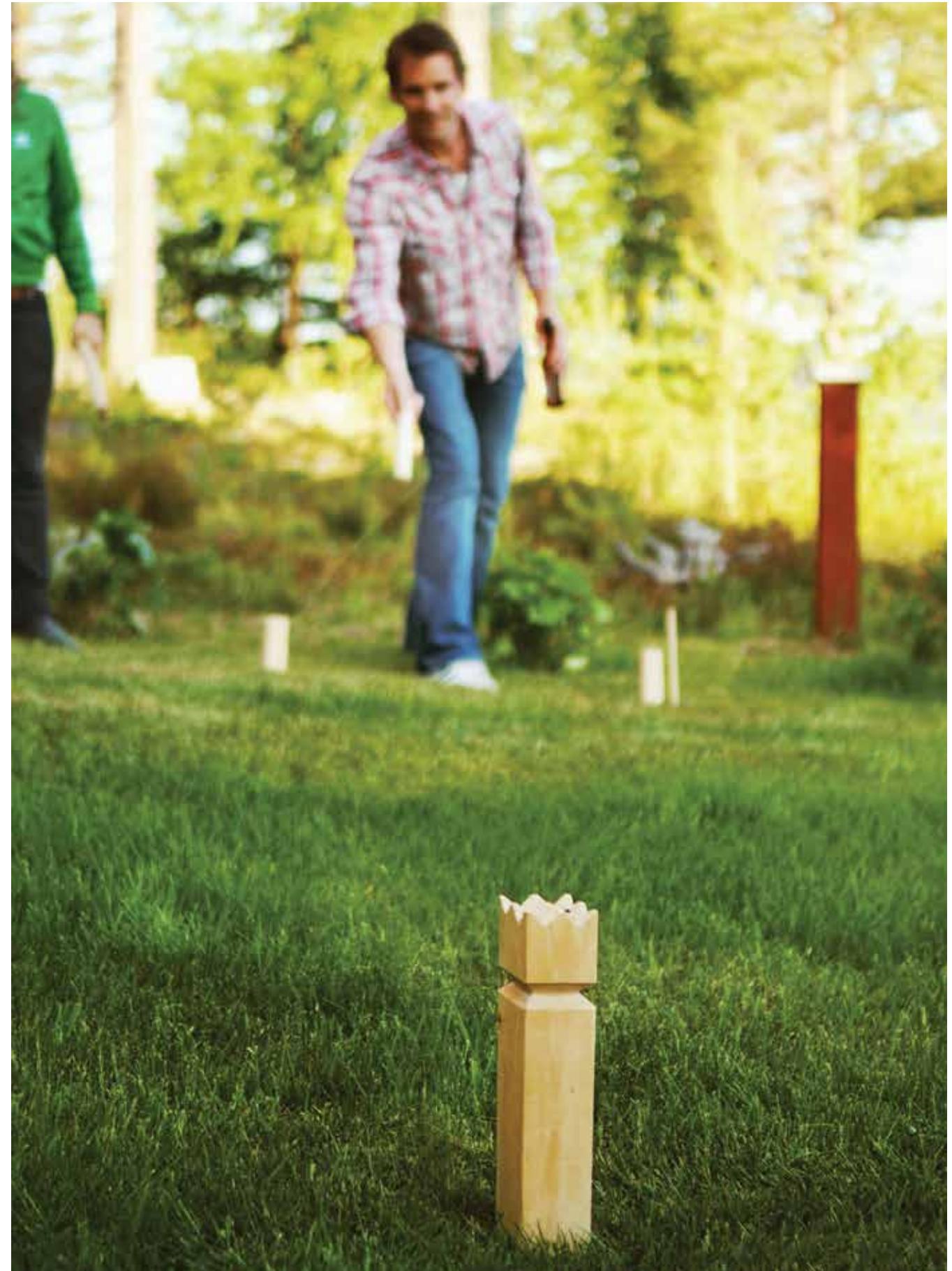
10 blocks.
6 sticks. 1 king.

The Nordic lawn game is
spreading rapidly across
North America.

BY RACHEL GUYAH

GAME ON!

PHOTO BY MASKOT





FUN FACT

"Kubb" derives from the Swedish term "vedkubbar," which means "wooden blocks."



When it comes to the game of kubb (pronounced "koob"), the concept seems almost too simple: tossing small chunks of wood at bigger chunks of wood — saving the biggest chunk of all, the king, for last.

And yet, it's precisely this (somewhat deceptive) simplicity that draws so many people to this Nordic lawn game, which is now rapidly spreading across North America.

"It's a beautiful game and sport," says Eric Anderson, founder and director of the U.S. National Kubb Championship. "There is skill, strategy and luck. The object is to knock things down, and I think it's human nature to want to do that. Also, the basic principles of the game require people to interact and get to know each other. I think that not only do people enjoy that — they want that in their lives."

Sometimes described as a combination of bowling, bocce and horseshoes, kubb is an outdoor throwing game that can be played competitively or recreationally. Using wooden sticks (batons), the main object of the game is to topple over your opponents' wooden blocks (called "kubbs"), then at last knock down the

king in the center of the field. The game consists of two teams, usually two to six players per team.

Since it's more about strategy, skill and luck than brute strength, kubb is a fun, family-friendly activity for all ages — making it a popular choice for picnics, parties and family reunions. "It's extremely inclusive," says Anderson. "Players that are 10 years and 75 years can compete with a 24-year-old triathlete."

Kubb's History

Despite its popularity, kubb's true origin is shrouded in mystery — though two theories seem to prevail.

The first theory relates to a game Vikings would play after attacking villages. Using their enemies' skulls as game pieces, they would try to knock down their opponent's skulls by tossing femur (thigh) bones at them. Grisly? Yes. True? Possibly, though there's no evidence to back that up.

"We know that games were played 1,000 years ago, but there is no proof that the Vikings did or did not play kubb," says Anderson. And yet, the legend lives on — kubb is even commonly referred to as "Viking chess."

The more modern (and verifiable) history of kubb traces its roots to Gotland — Sweden's largest island in the Baltic Sea. The first written mention of "kubb" appears to be a book published in 1931 by a Gotland ethnologist. Various versions of the game were played throughout the island and mainland, mostly on farmsteads or in the countryside. During the 1980s and 1990s, the game exploded after commercial sets became available. In 1995, Gotland hosted its first World

Championships. The game continued to spread across Scandinavia, England, Germany and other European nations.

Coming to America

So how did this tossing game with Nordic roots reach the shores of the New World? Most Eau Claire, Wisconsin, players can thank Anderson for its arrival. Sometimes referred to as the "godfather" of organized kubb in the United States, Anderson first played kubb in 2002 while in Sweden. In 2005, his love for the game flourished. One day while celebrating Midsummer in the Skåne countryside, Anderson and his friends played the game amid an idyllic backdrop of an orchard, forest and lake. "It was at that point that I fell in love with kubb," he says. "I didn't want to stop playing."

Luckily for him — and for many North American players today — he didn't. When Anderson, his wife and oldest daughter returned to the United States in July 2006, Anderson's late father, Steve, had a kubb set waiting for them back home in Illinois. This would turn out to be the gift that launched a thousand games.

In January 2007, when the family moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Anderson and his wife came up with the idea of hosting a small kubb tournament. That first year, the tournament had 15 teams and 35 players. A year later, those numbers doubled, and they've rapidly risen ever since. In 2016, the roster swelled to 128 teams and 460 players — that's 13 times more players than the inaugural event.

In recent years, kubb clubs and competitions have popped up throughout Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and the Midwest. There are

even teams and tournaments as far as California and North Carolina, with new ones being added every year.

Kubb for a Cause

When Anderson organized that first kubb tournament in 2007, the goal wasn't profit or pride — it was to raise money and bring awareness to the heartbreaking humanitarian crisis happening in Darfur, Sudan. "That year we raised money for Save Darfur and Aid Darfur, collected 40 pairs of eyeglasses for Unite for Sight in Sierra Leone, and assembled a large box of school supplies for a refugee camp in Ghana," says Anderson.

Fundraising continues to be a central tenet of the tournament, which is now a registered non-profit organization. The U.S. National Kubb Championship (usakubb.org) donates to two local charities, which help war victims and empower young girls. The championship has also set up the Steve Anderson Kubb Set Program (named after Eric's late father), which provides free kubb sets to communities to introduce and promote the game. Several tournaments that have cropped up in recent years have followed suit with that philanthropic spirit, often giving away much of the registration fees to various charitable organizations.

Living the Kubb Life

For many players, kubb isn't merely a game; it's a way of life. The game's motto at the World Championship in Sweden is: "Kubb unites people and creates peace on Earth." A lofty vision, but it just might work. When you knock down a kubb, you're also knocking down barriers. Age, race, gender, class — all are welcome to toss a few sticks,

work as a team, and make new friends.

Indeed, this game of wooden blocks seems to have a way of weaving itself into the fabric of a community. That's certainly been the case in Eau Claire, which, despite its modest population of 65,000, is known as the Kubb Capital of North America. "When I go to the dentist, we talk kubb," says Anderson. "Last week, my stepdad and I were at the grocery store and saw two different kubb players. Next thing you know, we start talking for 10 minutes to each of them ... about kubb. It's such a part of our community now. The hope is that it will continue to grow even more in the city." ☀



BUY A KUBB SET

Country Kubb
countrykubb.com

JP's Backyard Games
jpsbackyardgames.com

Yard Games
yardgames.com

Ingebretsen's
ingebretsens.com

KUBB 101

Equipment

- 1 king
- 10 kubbs
- 6 batons
- 4 corner stakes and 2 mid-pitch stakes (optional)
- Pitch (Field of Play)



Teams

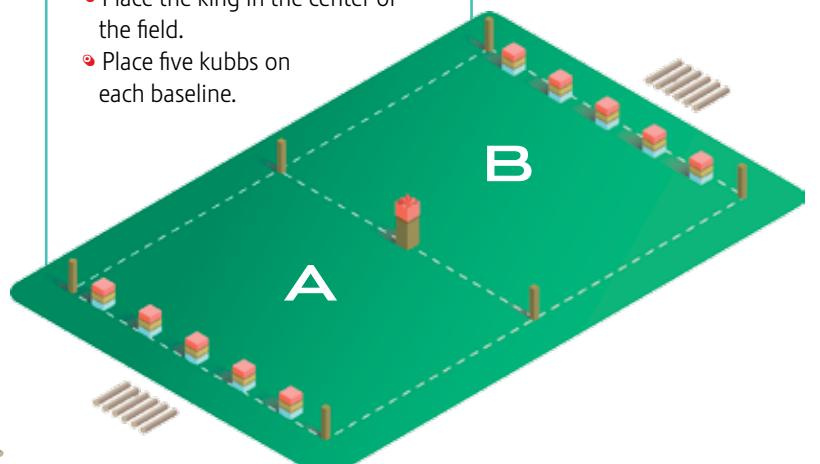
- 2 teams, 2–6 players each (sometimes more)

Objective

- Be the first team to knock down all of your opponent's kubbs, then last the king.
- Knocking down the king before the kubbs results in an automatic loss.

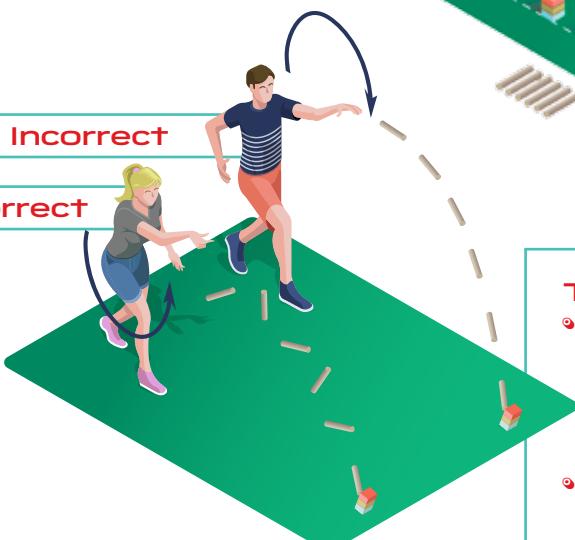
Setup

- Place stakes at the 4 corners of the pitch and at the mid-pitch.
- Place the king in the center of the field.
- Place five kubbs on each baseline.



Incorrect

Correct

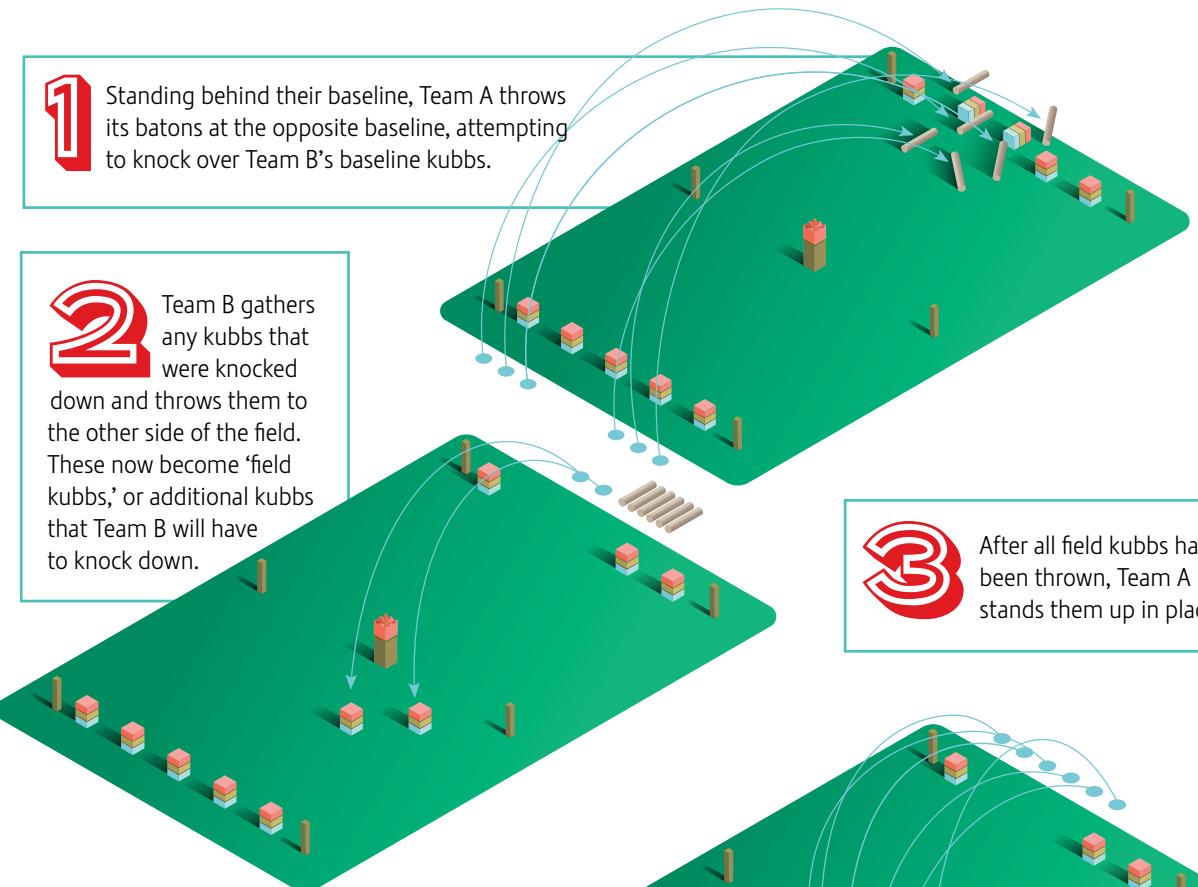


Throwing

- To start the game, both teams throw a baton at the king. The closest to the king without knocking it over gets to decide who goes first or what side they want to be on.
- Throwing must be done underhand, end over end. Batons cannot be thrown horizontally or overhand.

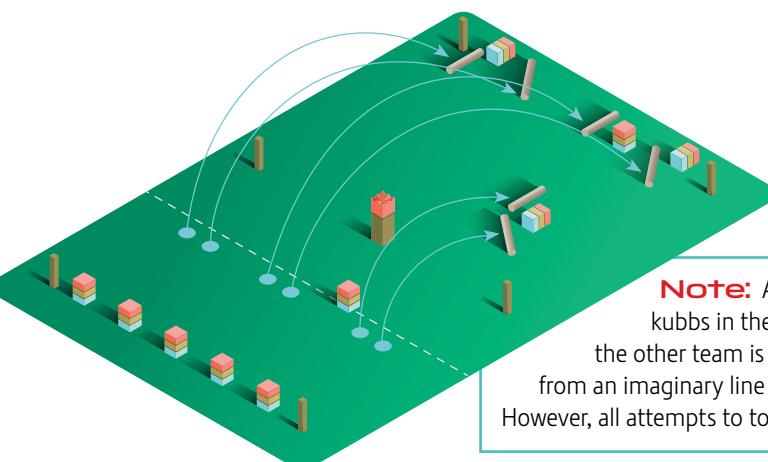
- 1** Standing behind their baseline, Team A throws its batons at the opposite baseline, attempting to knock over Team B's baseline kubbs.

- 2** Team B gathers any kubbs that were knocked down and throws them to the other side of the field. These now become 'field kubbs,' or additional kubbs that Team B will have to knock down.



- 3** After all field kubbs have been thrown, Team A stands them up in place.

- 4** Team B now throws its batons from behind the baseline. They must first knock down all field kubbs before toppling the baseline kubb. Any baseline kubb that is knocked down before the field kubbs must be stood back up and doesn't count.



- 5** Team A picks up any knocked down kubbs and throws them to the other side of the field to become field kubbs. Team B now stands them up in place. Play continues this way until one team knocks down all of their field and baseline kubbs, then lastly topples the king.

- Note:** At any time, if a team fails to knock down all field kubbs in their opponent's half of the field during that turn, then the other team is allowed to move up from the baseline and throw from an imaginary line running through the kubb closest to the center line. However, all attempts to topple the king must be thrown from the baseline.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RANDALL NELSON