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Hundreds of dancers compete, celebrate Native American heritage at Wacipi

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Participants in the 2019 Wacipi in the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community dance and march around the arena grounds on Saturday, Aug. 17, during the evening grand entry, when all 800-plus dancers perform together. Participants traveled from around the U.S. and Canada.

Photos by Dan Holtmeyer

For three days the drums kept up a nearly constant heartbeat, rising and falling in speed as hundreds of Native American dancers stomped and leapt.

More than 800 members of tribes from across the U.S. and parts of Canada gathered for the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community's annual Wacipi, or powwow, to dance and sing much as their ancestors did for important occasions throughout history. The event ran Friday through Sunday near Little Six Casino.

"This is Indian rock 'n' roll," said Steve Wood, a Cree and co-founder of the Northern Cree drum group from Alberta. Northern Cree and about a dozen other groups sang about the land, animals, warriors, courtship, even the dancing itself, Wood said.

Dancers from single digits to old age, many of them competing for thousands of dollars in prizes, meanwhile turned the arena grounds into a kaleidoscope of every color in every combination. Beadwork and medallions glinted in the sun as countless dress jingles and ankle bells clanged in earsplitting tempo.

"We're dancing for those that can't anymore," said Tonya Jackson, a member of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Nation in Michigan who traveled to Shakopee with several of her children, foster children and their cousins. One of her sons, for example, uses moccasins that belonged to her father before his old age slowed him down. "So he dances for him."

Jackson spoke as she embellished a daughter's leggings with needle and string while the kids dressed for Saturday evening's grand entry and competition. The family likes to add a couple of powwows to its circuit each year, Jackson said.

Dancing can bring a lot of pressure, Jasmyne Jackson, 18, said, but she mostly focuses on herself in the arena, keeping track of her footwork and making sure her regalia doesn't lose any pieces.

"It makes me feel good," she said.

Wacipi and other modern powwows around the country combine multiple tribes' centuries-old traditions of dancing after hunts or a move or for other ceremonies, according to the Mdewakanton community and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Encyclopedia of the Great Plains.

Some dances sway like prairie grass or strut like prairie chickens. Some are relatively sedate, focusing on simple double-steps, while others feature acrobatic full-body movements.

While the dances are a kind of common physical language among tribes around the continent, each competitor's regalia is unique, adorned with eagle feathers, horse hair and traditional designs such as bear claws or plants that mingle with sunglasses and baseball caps.

This year's Wacipi was free to attend, down from \$10 in the past, to try to remove anything keeping the public from joining, Mdewakanton Tribal Administrator Bill Rudnicki said Saturday night. The event went well with good weather, he added.

Dan Holtmeyer

Community editor

Dan Holtmeyer is the community editor for the Prior Lake and Savage papers. He grew up in Nebraska and worked as a journalist in Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas before coming to Minnesota in 2018.