

## **Bullrush**

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Question 2 asked for the name of a game which Sutton-Smith found was known by over 50 labels during the time he was researching children's games in NZ (Sutton-Smith, 1981, 55fn.) The question we asked was this:

2 Here is the description of another game:

This game needs a lot of players. All the players except one stand behind a line on a field with a parallel line some distance away. One person is in the middle. The person in the middle calls a player by name. That player (the runner) tries to run to the other line without being touched by the player in the middle. At any time the runner can call out a special word, and then all the other players also have to try to run across without being touched. Any person touched stays in the middle and helps the first person. The player in the middle can also make everyone run by calling out a special word.

Do children play that game at your school? (If you do not play it exactly like that, don't worry.)

- (a) What do you call this game?
- (b) What is the word you use to make everyone run?

Thirty-seven different names were reported in answer to 2(a). However, one was almost universally known: *Bullrush*. Only five schools of the 150 that responded to the questionnaire did **not** report this name. No school reported a term other than *Bullrush* without also reporting *Bullrush*. (A large number of schools told us that they did not play the game, because it was banned, but of course, they knew the name of the game that was banned, and most told us the name.) This universal adoption of the name *Bullrush* is in stark contrast to the situation reported by Sutton-Smith. (Four of the five schools that did not report it were in urban areas, one in Auckland, two in Christchurch, and one in Timaru. The one rural school not reporting it was in the centre of the North Island.)

Of the other terms reported, only two were of any significant frequency, and these were *Octopus* (34 occurrences) and *Seaweed* (16 occurrences). Even when similar terms were grouped together (e.g. *Colours*, *Colour Rush*, *Colour Tag*; *Touch*, *Touch Rush*, *Touch Bullrush*; *British Bulldog*, *Bulldog*), there were no more than four occurrences of any other name, and many were reported just once. There were no reports at all of names like *Keeny-Seeny*, which had considerable currency earlier. The sporadic reports of the term *Ballrush* are perhaps deserving of comment. This term was written by teachers in two of its four occurrences, and by individual students on the other two occasions. In NZ English, there is very little phonetic difference between *Bullrush* and *Ballrush*. It is quite possible that many more children than these four reports would suggest actually believe that the game is called *Ballrush*, but that their teachers, knowing the standard form, wrote *Bullrush* in response to a verbal rendering which was unclear between the two. This matter was pursued during school visits: individual children were asked to how spell it. In all schools the majority of children used the conventional spelling *Bullrush*. However, in significant numbers of Central Region schools, there were also children who thought it was spelled *Ballrush* (and one in the Southern Region who commented, very fairly, "I don't spell it, I play it!").

All the terms with four or more occurrences were mapped, in case there was any sign of regional variation in these. There does not appear to be. The occurrences of *Octopus* are scattered round the country from Northland to Southland, although there may be a tendency for this term to occur in urban rather than rural settings. *Seaweed* is slightly more common in the central areas of NZ than in either the north or the south, but it is not found exclusively in this area. The other terms mapped are listed here, with an outline of their distribution:

*Touch ((Bull)rush)*: 4 occurrences, 3 in Auckland, and 1 in the centre of the North Island.

*Tackle Bullrush*: 3 occurrences, 2 in Auckland, and one in the north of the Wellington region.

*Farmer, Farmer*: 4 occurrences, 1 in Auckland and three in diverse rural areas of the South Island.

*Ballrush*: 4 occurrences, 1 in Auckland, 1 in Hawkes Bay and 2 in Southland.

*Colours* (etc.): 1 in Auckland, 2 in Hawkes Bay and 1 in rural Nelson.

Most of these other names refer to “sanitised” versions of the game: modifications designed to rule out some of the roughest elements in the traditional rules. Thus in *Octopus* and *Seaweed*, when you are tagged, you have to stand still in the middle and try to tag others as they run past.

While there were 29 different responses for Question 2(b), it was also almost universally answered by *Bullrush*. The same five schools that did not report a name for the game, of course, did not report a term for 2(b), either. Of those schools which call the game *Bullrush*, only two did not report using the term *Bullrush* to make everyone run. They both reported some other (different) term instead. Other answers were even less common than in question 2(a). *Octopus* was again the second most common, but only 24 schools reported using this to make everyone run compared with 34 calling the game that. Similarly, *Seaweed* was next most common, with 11 reports, against 16 using *Seaweed* for the name of the game. *Go* and *Run* were reported from 8 schools each, and the remainder were very occasional only. The others mapped were:

*Free Pass*: 2 occurrences, both in Nelson.

*Go/Swim, Fishy* (each report different): 3 occurrences, Hawkes Bay, Wellington, Christchurch.

*Fruit Salad*: 2 occurrences, Nelson, Southland.

*Colour*: 3 occurrences, Hawkes Bay, Nelson, N. Canterbury.

*Everyone/body*: 2 occurrences, Auckland, Manawatu.

*Ballrush*: 4 occurrences, Auckland, Hawkes Bay, and two in Southland.

It is clear that there are no regional patterns to be seen, although in both cases, there is a tendency for *Octopus* to be urban rather than rural.

Because there was so little variation in evidence in relation to this data, no formal statistical analysis was made, and the maps are so unrevealing that they are not included.

### Snippets of Historical Information

Although we did not specifically ask for the information, quite a large number of *Listener* respondents told us what they had called this game. From their

responses, it appears that the name of the game used to be regionalised in New Zealand.

Throughout most of the North Island, the game was most often known as *King-o-seeny* (spelled in many different ways) or variants (e.g. *Keeny-seeny*) until the 1960s, at least.

In Wellington and the South Island, it was generally known as *Bar the door* (or some variant on this, e.g. *Barbardor*), probably until the 1970s. *Bullrush* was first reported from the Wairarapa in the 1930s, but began to appear a little more regularly in the 1950s. However there were odd pockets where some other name was used: *King Caesar* in the 1920s and 30s in Marlborough; *Sally Over* on the West Coast; *Red Rover* in East Otago.

It appears from this information that *Bullrush* began its rise in the 1970s, and rapidly replaced the other names.