

Bungee or Bungie Jumping

You've seen it, but perhaps are still unaware of the controversy surrounding bungee jumping. No, I'm not talking about the obvious discussion surrounding the safety of this sport. What I want to present in this article is the origins of the word 'bungee'. Actually, there is some controversy as to whether it is bungee or bungie jumping. My word processor's spell check feature likes the 'bungee' version, but as we shall soon see, this may not actually be the historically correct spelling.

While the sport of bungee jumping was brought to the forefront of the modern public's attention by a BBC documentary in the 1950s, the term bungee was in use prior to this time. The natives whose religious ceremony has evolved into this sport did not come up with this term, as some might suspect. Looking back into the dictionaries of the past and the etymology of the word, we can find this disclaimer: origin unknown. While this may be the official stance, let's take a closer look at the word, it's historical uses, and possible origins.

The first documented use in Western culture of any variation of the word bungee appeared in a novel called 'Tall Ship' in 1915. The spelling of the word in this novel was actually 'bunje', and was used as a nick-name for a physical training instructor on the ship. It just so happens that the term also referred to Indian rubber, or rubber that was exported from India at the time. Perhaps the nickname was used as a reference to the stretching performed as part of the instructor's training regimen, as similar to the stretching of rubber from the rubber tree.

The next variation occurs in 1934, in a journal called the 'N&Q'. The statement is made referencing the use of the term 'india-bungie' or 'bungie' in the school classrooms referring to soft rubber used as an eraser. Interestingly enough, the reference is to the word's usage some fifty years prior to the publication date, which would be back in the 1880s. Perhaps we are getting closer to the origin? Can we come to a conclusion yet as to whether it is bungee or bungie jumping?

Let's look a bit closer at the idea that the word comes from an Indian rubber produced at the turn of the 20th century. In the country of India, Hindi was and still is the native language. If we look into the Hindi language, we can find some idea as to the origin of this strange word. In the early 1800s the term 'bungy' and a variation, 'bhangi' was used in a derogatory manner towards house servants. In fact, during this time, the term described a low caste, usually employed as sweepers. They were considered among the lowest servants in the home. Could it be possible that the name for this group was later given to

a product that they began to produce? If these servants were put into the fields to harvest the sap of rubber trees, it would not be a far stretch to see their nickname associated with the product of their toil.

Whatever the case may be, today we see two primary spellings. Whether you participate in bungee or bungie jumping today may have more to do with where you go for your jump. Those in the northern hemisphere seem to prefer the term 'bungee', while those in the southern hemisphere stick with the more traditional 'bungie'.