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Adult entertainment The Boston Globe
Some say it's a national trend, grownups going back to childlike pursuits. Ever the trendsetter, Boston is, among other things, four square capital of the world.

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff | July 30, 2006

They call it The Scorpion, and when they utter its name, the voices of four square players around the city drop in awe. Jason McGibbon , reigning champion of the Boston league and a graduate student in mathematics, invented the deadly move, hurling himself to the floor, flicking his heels backward, like a scorpion snapping its venomous tail, and spiking the ball at a hapless opponent.

“It's a completely blind maneuver," he says. “I can't see the ball at all. I have to essentially guess where it's going to be.”

McGibbon, 25, speaks with the analytic precision of a man more inclined to puzzle out differential geometry in a library than terrorize competitors with his athletic prowess. But on the league's four square courts -- marked by tape stuck to the wood floor of the basketball court at the Cambridge YWCA -- he dominates.

“As much as any four square player is ready to be signed, he's the closest," says Sean Effel , co founder of Squarefour , which claims to be the world's first adult four square league.

In the game, four players each stand in a square and bounce a ball among them, trying to get each other out and score points.

The legions of elementary schoolchildren who play four square at recess could never have imagined The Scorpion. And they would undoubtedly be bewildered by the idea of car-driving, job-holding, bill-paying grown-ups tussling over the bouncy red ball of recess lore.

But in the shadow of some of the world's most hallowed institutes of learning, playground games for those in the double-digit years are booming. Squarefour, which now has 42 players, has been growing each year since its inaugural game in 2003. In the warm months, hundreds of adults spread across parks in Somerville, Cambridge, and Charlestown for kickball leagues. And when the weather turns cool, hundreds more fork over money to pelt one another in dodgeball tournaments.

Christopher Noxon , an author and 37-year-old kickball player, invented a name for adults who return to their childhood pursuits: juveniles. Noxon says the trend is broader than playground games; in researching his book, “Rejuvenile ,” published last month, he found adults who make weekly pilgrimages to Disney World , worship Tweety Bird, and cook in Easy-Bake Ovens .

“So many of us have created this sort of zone with either kickball or flip-flops or Necco wafer habits," says Noxon, who met his wife on a kickball field and proposed by hiding a ring inside a red rubber ball. “There were these things that we were hanging on to that remind us of a much more simple and kind of wondrous part of ourselves.”

Marketers, eager to create products that appeal to an adult population immersed in a second childhood, researched the roots of the rejuvenile. "They traced it right back to 9/11," Noxon says. But he also sees other motivations, including anxiety produced by a fast-moving world and the commercial glorification of youth. Noxon found a high number of rejuveniles working in high-tech and creative fields, which demand adaptability, the essence of childhood.

Molly Froelich, 42, a Somerville life coach and a top-ranking Squarefour player, says adults tend to get too serious about most kinds of play: They race around a soccer field, for instance, as a means to victory or cardiovascular health. But the appeal of four square, she says, is that there is no ulterior motive.

"I don't think anybody's going to get a hard body by playing four square," she says. "So there's got to be some other reason. It's got to be for the enjoyment and the silliness of it."

Dana Ostberg, the reigning Ladies World Four Square champion, sees the game as an equalizer: Everyone -- adults, children, athletes, couch potatoes -- can play. "To me, that's the greatest part -- to be schooled by a fourth-grader," she says. "Amazing!"

On a humid Wednesday night at Somerville's Nunziato Field, the air is thick with cheers and shouts and entreaties: "Second base! Second base! SECOND BASE!" Four teams, playing two simultaneous games, are competing in the Massachusetts Minutemen division, one of three local leagues of the World Adult Kickball Association. WAKA, a group that sees kickball as a route to social interaction, provides rules, T-shirts, and official red balls.

In one corner of the field, Pathfinder is kicking against 4th Base, a team of serious players who have not lost a game this season. The 4th Base pitcher warms up, his face revealing nothing, his right arm circling the ball as if he were promenading a dance partner. He steps forward and pulls his arm back, and the ball races toward home plate with a nasty spin.

A young woman in her team's bright yellow T-shirt kicks the ball. It arcs up, up, and down -- into the open arms of a 4th Base player. After two more outs, 4th Base is up and the team's captain, Simon Holroyd, watches the game with a clipboard in hand, marking down every play.

"I don't want to reveal too much of our strategy, but we try to alternate boy, boy, girl, girl," he says. "We find it gives us a good mix of power and speed."

JaeMi Pennington, president of the Minutemen division, laughed when he and his friends first heard about a kickball team for adults. "Then we realized this sounds like fun," he says, and they joined.

"You see athletes out there," he says. "You see people who are completely uncoordinated. If you can't kick an 11-inch ball, you've got to know you stink. But that's not the point."

Of all the playground sports for adults, dodgeball may be the most popular, inspired by an improbable muse: the goofy 2004 Ben Stiller comedy, "Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story," where the clang of a frying pan echoed whenever the red ball thwacked someone on the court. The sting of the rubber balls has meted out many psychic injuries in the annals of gym class; the hard-core leagues still use them.

"When you have an 80-mile-an-hour ball coming at you that you think might hurt you, it gives you a heightened sense of excitement and involvement in the game and overall enjoyment," says Paul Naddaff, founder and owner of Big Kids Dodgeball, which creates tournaments-for-hire at the Huntington Avenue YMCA.

But the teams that play through Boston Ski & Sports Club use the gentler foam balls recommended by the National Amateur Dodgeball Association -- which is, amazingly, just one of several national organizations devoted to adult dodgeball. "It's hard to get too competitive when you're playing a fifth-grade game," says Scott Buckley, 27, a lawyer

whose team, the Two-Bit Zucchini's, was the recent Boston Ski & Sports Club champion.

And for adults whose lives are laden with responsibility, that may be the ultimate appeal.

"You revert back to when you were in grammar school," says Josh Smith, 29, general manager at Cambridge Racquet & Fitness Club, who has played in some of the gym's tournaments. "You're out there throwing the ball and you think you're 10 years old again."

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