The games people play

From kickball to footbag, summer in Boston offers a wealth of playground pastimes for the kid in you.
BY CAMILLE DODERO

IN THE FIFTH grade, there was no more effective way to compensate for athletic incompetence than with a hearty game of recess kickball. You could forget those repeated failures to climb the bristly ropes in gym class, the attempts to alley-oop a basketball without missing the backboard, the mortifying knack for whiffing at the plate. You didn't need muscular arms, fancy footwork, or a good eye to shine at kickball; you simply needed a power punt that could launch a rolling rubber orb into the sky, maybe even eclipse the sun. And if you channeled all that pent-up angst into kicking that clown nose of a ball, you could whap that sucker into the outfield, over the stupid head of the nasty bully who screamed about your cooties on the bus. Kickball served as both cootie vindication and restored pride, a means of disguising yourself as a force on the playing field when you damn well knew you belonged in the school band.

Some people never got over that feeling. Even as adults, people like playing games they don't need to be good at to enjoy. Especially of late, playground pastimes and alternative outdoor games -- which don't require a lifetime of lessons to play -- are becoming more visible. In less than five years, the World Adult Kickball Association (WAKA) has grown from a 300-person club in Washington, DC, to a 10,000-member organization with spore-like divisions forming all over the country, from California to Maine. And this month, Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story, a comedy starring Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn, hits theaters. So when it's warm and you want to play outside, but you still can't connect the ball with the bat or even hit the rim of the hoop, here are some games anyone can play.

Bocce ball

Mamma mia! Bocce ball is Italian bowling. And half the fun of the al fresco game is getting to expand your basic command of Frank Sinatra's favorite Romance language. Each captain is a "capo." The smallest ball, or the target, is the "pallino" -- which means, appropriately, ball. Instead of aiming for 10 pins, players ("giocatori") try to roll their bigger balls closest to the pallino. Begin the game by throwing the pallino so weakly that it doesn't roll past half court? Brutto! Hit the pallino with your bigger ball? Buono! Be a bad player and step over the foul line repeatedly? Cattivo! Head over to the North End's Puopolo Park, which has three regulation bocce courts, and try to steal one of them from the old Italian veterans? Arrivederci!

Puopolo Park, 475 Commercial Street, off Hanover Street, Boston.

Four square

There's no more reliable muse than nudity -- just ask 27-year-old Sean Effel. Effel (a/k/a "Smashasaurus Wrecks") and his pal Dana Ostberg were skinny-dipping in a Concord pond last year when they found themselves thinking about big red balls. A few years earlier, they'd both discovered an affection for the bouncy playground pastime "four square" -- a

rubber-ball-smacking sport that Effel explains as "four-way volleyball without the net" -- and started hosting annual four-square parties in Somerville. But that day in the water, the pals decided to turn the diversion from a yearly springtime romp into a competitive indoor Boston-area league with official rules, detailed scorecards, and individual player standings. So this past winter, Boston's first four-square season enlisted nearly 40 players between the ages of 20 and 41 for nine Sunday-afternoon matches. It was such a "raging success," Effel says, that more laid-back pick-up four-square games will continue this summer.

Staged in a 16-by-16-foot space divided into four equal portions, four square takes cues from tennis: the ball has to be served to the opposite corner, and it can only bounce once in each square, or the player who occupies the square is out. Although four square's typically a schoolyard diversion that competes for kids' attention with the likes of Red Rover and freeze tag, it also features specialized moves, like a "double tap" (hitting an airborne ball twice, like setting up a spike in volleyball) and a "black jack" (catching a fly ball before it lands and getting the person who hit it out).

Effel and Ostberg hold the summer pick-up games on a concrete block of badminton courts near Porter Square, but Effel's quick to mention that you don't actually need a playground court for four square. "You can play in a parking lot or a driveway," he says. "A stick of chalk and a rubber ball would be enough."

Although four square is a family game -- after the local league was featured on National Public Radio's Only a Game, two elementary-school kids showed up to join a few games -- the Cambridge/Somerville league does seem to keep finding itself naked. Last year, nine players posed semi-nude for "Cambridge Uncovered," an academic calendar sponsored by Cambridge Community Television (CCTV), where Effel works as a production coordinator. The nine members posed in kneepads, headbands, and strategically placed rubber balls.

Four-square pick-up games are usually held on Sundays, at 4 p.m., at Somerville's Morse Kelley Playground, on Summer and Craigie Streets. Visit www.squarefour.org.

Footbag

In 1972, an Oregonian by the name of John Stalberger invented the name "hacky sack" -- a neologistic abbreviation for "hack the sack" -- for the bean-bag-hitting hobby he'd taken up as a stretching exercise after knee surgery. Before long, Stalberger and partner Mike Marshall had trademarked the name, eventually selling it to Wham-O!, the famed frisbee-hawking company; for a generic label for the sport, they coined the term "footbag." But footbag's also known as the Game Dirty Hippies Play.

Justin Migliorisi, a Berklee student who considers himself a "serious shredder" -- the colloquial term for freestyle footbagger -- doesn't care about the hemp-necklace-wearing, jam-band-fan stereotype of his favorite sport. "If [you] actually saw a competition, it would seem more like a track competition than a gathering of the vibes," he writes in an e- mail. "Most serious and professional shredders are in better shape than most pro athletes." Migliorisi actually learned how to hack in high school. After breaking his kneecap, he too went through knee surgery. "It's actually quite strange that I got into it and became somewhat good, considering I am six-five and 290 pounds," he says. "People laugh and comment that I actually look rather graceful and nimble when I pull off some rather crazy moves."

But Migliorisi, who posted an open call on the International Footbag Players' Association (IFPA) Web site seeking fellow Boston shredders, says there're aren't many freestyling folks like him in the Boston area. There are, however, spontaneous footbagging circles that casually erupt in green spaces, on college campuses, and in open areas around town where you don't need skills to play. The object of the circles? Try to keep the hacky sack aloft for as long as possible. And there're plenty of variations on juggling the bean bag, such as footbag golf (traversing a set course with the lowest number of kicks) and speed hacking (scoring the highest number of kicks within a set time).

Although Migliorisi doesn't think the free-love stereotype is deserved, there's definitely an inclusive, free-love nature to footbag. On its Web site, the IFPA concludes its Statement of Purpose with the item "Peace through play."

Visit the International Footbag Players' Association at www.footbag.org. Find Justin "Migs" Migliorisi "hacking it up" on the Christian Science Plaza, 175 Huntington Avenue, Boston, or on the corner of Mass Ave and Boylston Street, in Boston.

Kickball

This is the summer of red rubber balls. Not only is kickball resurfacing nationally, but the World Adult Kickball Association (WAKA) is finally setting up camp in Boston. As of last week, 134 members had registered under team names like Last Ones Picked, Kickin' It Old School, and Bruce's Moose Knuckles -- impressive, but Boston's budding Ironsides Division has room for more than 400 participants. Joel Rothman, a 27-year-old who relocated from DC to Boston two years ago, says our conservative city's reticent social climate makes it a little more difficult to wrangle up participants than it is in the capital. "Moving back to Boston after being in a town like Washington, DC -- where in DC, networking was second nature to people -- has been strange," he admits. "Here in Boston, everyone's way more reserved. What I'm trying to foster is that people can just come out and have fun." And WAKA is more social gathering than cutthroat competition. "It's extremely noncompetitive," says Rothman, who joined WAKA in its embryonic stages. "Everyone's on the same playing field."

When WAKA representative Aden Beihl tells people he plays organized kickball, they respond incredulously. "Some people are like, `Really? Kickball?' But then they're like, `Can I play?' "

The kickball objective is the same as it was back in the day: whap the ball, run the bases, dodge the ball, try to score. And the rules have remained the same, too: the kicker is out when a fly ball gets caught, don't aim for the head, no stealing bases. But what has definitely changed is the post-game celebration: since a local bar sponsors each WAKA league, teams are encouraged to liquor up after the game.

WAKA charges a registration fee, but other local twentysomethings have formed their own DIY kickball leagues. Like the Somerville United Consortium of Kickball Aficionados (SUCKA), a group started by Somerville residents Jenni McKee, Leah Gotcsik, and Karley Ausiello, which gathers regularly in Winter Hill for casual kickball games. They prefer blacktop courts to baseball fields because the space is smaller and there's less running. "Although you can fall and get hurt," writes 27-year-old McKee in an e- mail. "At our age no one wants a skinned knee, you know?" If not enough people show, they'll employ "ghost runners," imaginary people to traverse the bases, or they'll ask the neighborhood kids to join. And since they're playing with one ball, they have to make rules to deal with disaster. "If you pop the ball on a rusty fence, the other team wins," explains McKee. "When the ball pops, everybody puts their arms up and goes, `Oh, no!' It's completely traumatic."

The WAKA season kick-off takes place on Sunday, June 6, at 3:30 p.m., at Roberto Clemente Park, located between Jersey and Kilmarnock Streets on Park Drive in the Back Bay Fens. Registration fee is $62 per player. Visit www.worldkickball.com.

Miniature golf

Along the same thoroughfare as Prince Restaurant's gargantuan Leaning Tower of Pizza and down the road from the Hilltop Steakhouse's colossal green cactus stands a Brobdingnagian orange Tyrannosaurus rex with a disjointed tail and wrinkly neck. His name is Nick. Permanently frozen in time like a cheap prop transported from Land of the Lost, the carnivore is named after the original owner of Saugus's Route 1 Miniature Golf & Batting Cages, the outdoor putting green where he stands guard, gritting his teeth at oncoming traffic. Nick is without a doubt the most menacing monster on the premises -- aside from nasty children who scream for ice cream when they're bored with mini-golf. Marked by a neon sign, Route 1 Miniature Golf & Batting Cages is totally retro, appearing like a preserved fossil from a bygone era. And if you're not very good, you can still have fun: offer to be the scorekeeper. Scribble down the numbers with a pinkie-size pencil.

Route 1 Miniature Golf & Batting Cages is open daily, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., at 1575 Broadway, in Saugus. Call

(781) 233-2811.

Outdoor chess

PLAY THE CHESS MASTER, $2, beckons Murray Turnball's sign outside Harvard Square's Au Bon Pain, issuing a public challenge to all bystanders. Stationed at a slate checkerboard permanently affixed to the flaky-pastry chain's outdoor café, Turnball has become such an immovable fixture on the Harvard Square cityscape that a few enterprising imitators have capitalized on his titular recognition: PLAY THE CHESS MISTER reads the sign of one witty amateur who shows up intermittently; PLAY THE BEARDED CHESS LADY begs another contender -- who is, in fact, a bearded chess-playing homeless lady.

But Turnball is the unofficial blitz-chess baron of Cambridge. And the hirsute Harvard graduate makes his living off these $2 matches, supplemented by teaching chess lessons. Usually, entire blitz-chess matches last no more than five minutes. Turnball's so damn good -- he's ranked in the top one percent of all rated players -- that he allots competitors six minutes to make their moves, while he gets only three. And even with that handicap, he always prevails. So most chess tyros don't come to win. "It is unlikely that some guy who played chess with his dad or played on his high school chess team stands a chance against the guys playing for money," e- mails Mike Henroid, long-time chess player and former chess columnist for the Boston Herald. Rather, they come for a quick-and-dirty lesson. "Often times, the regular `customers' will get more generous feedback and advice once they establish themselves as good for a few bucks every time they visit the Square."

On warm nights, Au Bon Pain's seating area draws a diverse crowd: curious spectators, ranked players, plenty of "patzers" -- chess argot for "someone who just moves the pieces but isn't a threat to beat a good player," Henroid explains. The regulars are used to having "wood-pushers" -- another chess insult -- inundate their outdoor enclave. "Some tourists will arrange the pieces wrong, swapping the king and queen or reversing the knights and bishops," Henroid writes. "Some don't understand how a chess timer works." And like any game, it's easy for seasoned veterans to identify a greenhorn. "How to tell if a guy is a casual player? Just watch him play."

If you're a novice, don't let the possibility of not being good enough scare you away. You can bring your own equipment -- board, pieces, and timer -- and set up your own game on a nearby table. But there are unofficial rules: one board quickly becomes a three-player rotation, with the third-man-out onlooker taking on the loser. And if you really are a patzer, you may find yourself sitting out half the matches. Which might make you look like a putz.

Au Bon Pain, Harvard Square, Cambridge.

Ultimate frisbee

If there's a nostalgic revival of playground games, ultimate frisbee is a juvenile throwback that's never really been for kids. A frisbee is technically a toy, but college kids were the first group to throw around a metal pie tin in the '40s, a casual activity that would later beget the famous disc. And college students are still a sizable percentage of ultimate's demographic. Especially in Boston, where there are more than a dozen flying-saucer-tossing clubs on local college campuses -- both the women's team at MIT and the men's club at Tufts placed high in the Frisbee United Players Association's 2004 national college championships. "The ultimate scene is more active than any other post-college sport in terms of pick-up and league," says Geoffrey Hyatt, a 10-year veteran of the game. "There's just so much of it. You could play ultimate any night of the week -- and some people do."

Locally, the Boston Ultimate Disc Alliance sponsors year-round leagues, plus pick-up games all over the Boston metropolitan area. Hyatt, who's 37 but insists he isn't the oldest guy out there, says each pick-up game has its own "distinct flair." On Saturday mornings at Tufts, the players cavort around barefoot; on Sunday afternoons in Jamaica Plain, the flying-saucer tossers are more skilled, sprinting across the field in cleats.

But Hyatt suggests that a major reason for ultimate's popularity is that it's accessible to beginners. "As a sport, it's

about as easy to learn as basketball or soccer," he says. "You can start playing the first minute you step onto the field and be fine. It's not like baseball [where] if you can't play, you always strike out." Employing elements of basketball, lacrosse, and soccer, ultimate's objective is to score a goal by passing the frisbee from player to player. Like basketball, players spend the game covering another player, so participants get paired off according to skill level. But once a player catches the frisbee, he or she can't run and only has 10 seconds to throw the disc to a teammate. "Once beginners get the frisbee, they go, `Ahhhhhhh' and throw it away," says Hyatt. "Even though you only have 10 seconds to throw it away, you can be relaxed."

Visit Boston Ultimate Disc Alliance at www.buda.org.

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