



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 9/23/22



The Importance of Play in the Lives of our Children

Before sitting down to write this article, I took some time to review the archive from last year's IIMY? articles. In doing so, I was reminded that my final installment last year was a response to the tragic news out of Uvalde, Texas the day prior, which compelled me to back-burner the idea for this article as the topic of summertime games seemed suddenly off the mark. As we turn the corner into a new year, filled with the gifts of hope and promise that our students bring us each day, with the trust and support our parents honor us with, and with the passion and dedication our teachers and staff exemplify in everything they do, my heart is in my hands as I wish us all a peaceful and joyous 2022-23.

In this spirit, what could be better than starting 22-23 with an IIMY? article about play? Play is serious stuff and an important part of wellness, an observation that is neither original nor unique to Homo sapiens. Anyone who has seen [the video of the crow](#) "snowboarding" down the pitched roof on a bottle cap, or anyone who has an IG account for that matter, will recognize the presence of play beyond our species. Even our language itself points us towards this realization: to wit, the word "recreation." The breaks we take help us rebuild or re-create our psyches and our souls following encounters with the non play world, and if that's too fuzzy for you, there is an ample body of HR and brain science research that underscores the importance of a balanced work/play life as we strive to live longer, more productive, and more fulfilled lives.

Having procrastinated writing this article as long as I could, I realized that the universe was sending me a message to get started: our gaga pit was being delivered and we were taking initial steps towards upgrading our tetherball "area," two major "play stations" on our campus. At the same time, plans for our fall athletics season were being finalized in the announcement of the Explorer Cross Country Team. As these were being checked off our operations "to do list," I heard someone comment that the gaga pit looked like a fight club

octagon. Not quite the optics we had in mind, but as Oscar Wilde was once credited with saying, “the only thing worse than being talked about... is NOT being talked about,” so there’s that.

My great thanks to the PTO, Krista Lindberg especially, for adopting gaga ball as a Jog-a-Thon gift to the school (and to Kelly Tynon for putting it on the radar). Also, great thanks are due to Brittney Bryant for coordinating the supplies and installation date for gaga and the rubber mulch for tetherball. Of course, I am also grateful for the time and work Adam May and Jesse Bryant will devote to doing all the excavating, lifting, dragging, and building to bring it all home (and I sincerely hope that this article is NOT the way they are learning about their role in these plans!). Finally, thanks to Kayla Weber and Kenzie Parsons for their enthusiasm in offering to coach our runners this season as we look towards our first meet at Avery Park October 13th (details to follow). GO EXPLORERS!

As I watched the delivery of the rubber padding that will comprise the floor of the gaga pit, preventing it from becoming a *mud* pit in November, and as the gaga walls themselves showed up, I found myself thinking about all of the GREAT games I used to enjoy playing as a child. Surrounded, as I was, by foursquare courts painted on the pavement adjacent to where the gaga pit will live, I waxed nostalgic about playing in the street, which I used to love, and I wondered whether or not it was time to bring some of these street games back: let’s just call it an Ashbrook School 25th anniversary retrospective even though, for me, I’ll have to go back much further than a mere quarter century to access some of these memories!

No, I am not talking about “pterodactyl ptag” or “chase the giant boulder down the hill” or “etch a hunting tableau on a cave wall!” I am not that old, but just old enough to get a bit sad when I think that *maybe* these games are gone forever, now that kids are more inclined to default to their screens in a world where we celebrate how a game like Pokemon Go lets us get our steps in! Like a language that is defined as dead, when no one in the generation before the current one has spoken it, I am afraid these games are on a sort of endangered species list. So, if you were not fortunate enough to be taught these games by your parents or grandparents, call this my public service to revive a few oldies but goodies.

The games I am talking about were simple and most do not require anything more than common household items, maybe a ball (but even ball games did not always require an actual ball), and most importantly were likely made-up by creative kids looking for something to do. In some cases we “up cycled” before we knew what that meant, items such as bottlecaps, cans, sticks, and rags... stuff that would’ve gone into the landfill, and maybe eventually did, but NOT before we had our fun!

Do you remember any of these?

Skelly (AKA Skelzies)

Our neighborhood skelly “board” was taped (some used chalk... but the real boards were taped) on a sidewalk out in front of the building where my family lived because the concrete was especially smooth there, the sidewalk was super wide, and our super did not hose it down on a daily basis, as others did). As playing pieces, my friends and I spent WAY more time than on homework, on the hunt for THE PERFECT bottle cap to fill with THE PERFECT clay (or wax, which meant we needed to light a candle or melt wax on our moms’ irons, both methods risking the burning down of our building). As an unwritten skelly rule or superstition, it was important that you actually purchased and drank the full bottle of soda in a single swig before using the bottle cap... though many rookies found their bottle caps in the dumpster out in front of the church on our street (my personal favorite, which I owned until about a year ago when it was lost in my move to Corvallis, was from a bottle of Orange Crush!). Games would usually start when you bumped into a buddy in close proximity to a neighborhood skelly board. As you approached each other coming down the sidewalk you’d instinctively dig through the flotsam and jetsam in the bottom of your pocket to retrieve three or four of your favorite bottle caps, and it was game on.

Kick the Can

It’s not the game many think it is. Would you be surprised to know it’s sort of a combo of tag and hide and seek? It’s much more than JUST kicking a can, which could be fun, but is not the game I grew up with. Whichever street played host to this or other games, idiosyncrasies of each neighborhood played an important role in the total experience. For example, on our street, we had two elderly neighbors who lived on opposite sides of the street, Mr. Spon and Mrs. Reed. If you ever saw photos of people staring out city windows and just people-watching all day, you have an image of these two neighbors, and they brought an added and eventually valued dimension, unique to our street, to the game. From their windows, they would call out to the person who was “it” and tell them where the other 15 or so kids were hiding, or warn them that someone was getting close to kicking the can. At first this behavior really annoyed us, but we eventually started to include them in the game. To do this, we would ring their buzzers or toss stones up at their firescapes to summon them to their watching spots because we found that their participation kept the game moving; without them, the game could stall as the person who was “it” grew tired of looking for those who were hiding, or was unable to get out of being “it” because they could not defend the can. Years after I left home, Mr. Spon died, and when I attended the funeral, I was not surprised to find several of my friends at the wake, which was a nice reunion and a chance to celebrate the life of a man we grew up with.

Hit the Bat (my personal favorite)

This is the ONE game I could not find rules for anywhere on the Internet. I never thought it was possible, but I may have found something NO ONE ELSE has ever thought of posting

about! We used to play this on our block because not a lot of people parked there (probably because we played this game there). You need one baseball, one bat, and a baseball glove for each player. If you used a tennis ball, you could skip the gloves (and all the people who park on your street will be grateful). The person who was up first (and we used [this method](#) to determine who this was... no, that's NOT me on the pitcher's mound!) would hit the ball to others down the street "in the field," which could be as many as 10 kids, so it got pretty physical as everyone ran to catch the ball. Once the ball was hit, the batter put the bat down on the street from right where they hit it. The person who caught the ball, from the exact spot where they caught the ball, would roll the ball back towards the batter and try to (you guessed it) hit the bat. If the ball was rolling fast enough when it hit the bat, the ball would bounce straight up. The person who hit it would need to bare-hand catch it once it hit the bat and bounced up, and if they did this, the batter would retain the role of batter. The batter was replaced by the person who rolled the ball that the batter could not catch. The trick was to roll the ball so slowly that it hit the bat and either did NOT bounce up very high, or just tapped the bat and was totally uncatchable, called a rolley, the equivalent of an ace in tennis. IF the fielded ball was caught on the sidewalk or somewhere else where the catcher could not see the bat, they could walk out to the street in a straight line, without getting closer to the bat, until they could see the bat, and from there roll the ball to hit the bat.

Stoop Ball

While there are two or three videos illustrating this game on the Internet, I am not happy with any of them, but I did find these instructions, which I modified to account for my old neighborhood's rules. All you need is a rubber ball (such as a "Spaldeen" or other similar "pinkie" type ball) and a stoop (stoop comes from the Dutch word for steps, by the way, since the Dutch were original settlers of NYC... hence the windmill on the NYC municipal seal... and on a not unfamiliar local coffee company logo). Stoop ball is played by a minimum of two players and a maximum of... however many will fit in the street. The rules are based loosely on baseball. One player is the "batter" and the other players are the "fielders." The batter stands immediately in front of the stoop while the fielders stand behind the batter in the street and across the street on the sidewalk. The "batter" throws a rubber ball at the stoop. The ball flies back towards the fielders, who are also facing the stoop. The objective is to throw the ball at the steps so it bounces back in the air as far as possible over the heads of the fielders (best if you hit the corner of the step, called "a pointy"), therefore registering bigger hits and more points for the batter. The number of bases registered by a hit is determined by the distance traveled by the ball before it is fielded, unless the ball is caught on the fly resulting in an out, and the batter gets three of these before s/he is in the field. For example, if my first throw registers as a single, and my second throw registers as a double, I have a man on second and third. A home run is when the ball hits the building across the street on a fly (and you can imagine how excited the residents of THAT building were). Every neighborhood had its own rules for the distances leading to bases, often marked on the street with chalk or by items like

manholes, and someone (usually a play's younger sibling) was given the job of blocking the sewer drain so we did not lose the ball. If you cannot find a "stoop" anywhere at your house, you can use any set of steps, stoop or not. There actually is a Stoopball League of America which holds its annual world championships every July in Clinton, Wisconsin.

Marbles

We used to play this on in a dirt patch alongside the building where my family lived. Instead of using a string to mark the circle, we'd just use a stick to scrape a circle in the soil. We would each add X10 marbles to the circle, and we each had our own special shooter marble. We DID use a larger marble in the same way the instructor in this video describes, but we DID NOT call it the king bonker as he did: we did not have any name for it, now that I think about it, but you DEFINITELY did NOT want to hit it with your shooter because of the penalty described in the video. Sometimes we played for "keepees" but most often not, and it was best to be clear about this at the start of a game. Of all the games here, this is one that could easily be played inside, which is GREAT if you live in a place where it rains a lot for long periods of time... just sayin'.

SPUD

I like these instructions, but will add some nuances from my neighborhood (every block had its own neighborhood rules and we would have to learn them if we were playing the game somewhere other than on our own block). For example, on our block, if the person who had the ball tossed at them could keep his or her feet planted on the ground, and while doing so, move in a way that allowed them to avoid getting hit by the ball, they would not get a letter... but they had to keep their feet planted. If they moved their feet at all, they automatically earned a letter. One block over, this was NOT a rule, but in that neighborhood, if you hit a person with the ball above the waist, YOU got the letter, so the person getting the ball tossed at them COULD move (keeping their feet planted) so that the tossed ball would hit them above the waist. While both are great additions because they give the person getting the ball tossed at them a chance to get out of a letter, the former is also great because it encourages the person who is tossing the ball to aim at the feet vs. other parts of the body. Also, if you are playing on a street, the runners CANNOT hide behind cars or other objects you might expect to find on a street: runners are required to stand straight up right where they freeze when the catcher yells SPUD! We used to play this game with a pink Spalden ball, and once all of these had rolled down the sewer drain, which was about 5 minutes after we bought them, we would use rags tied in knots, a stuffed animal someone donated to the cause, or an old shoe... really.

Maybe there's one or two here that your kids would like to play, and although maybe not as exciting as a fight club elective, I am definitely thinking about a "NYC Street Games" elective, and I know the very first seven words I will use when I greet those students who sign up: "When I was a kid your age. ... "

If you are looking for other ideas, or for more clarity on, or variations of, any of the above, you might want to check out one of these (they are all clickable links).

