

Playing for Keeps

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If you grew up in the 1940's, 50's or 60's there is a very good chance you played or knew about the game of marbles. There was rarely a neighborhood or schoolyard across America where you could not find a group of kids in a circle "shooting for keeps." The funny thing about the game was that the rules changed depending upon the local neighborhood customs of the group with whom you were playing. There are hundreds (maybe thousands) of games and variations of marbles. It was so popular that for awhile both children and adults became obsessed with playing and/or watching games every chance they could. Most kids had a bag of marbles tucked into their school bag or lunch box so they could play during recess or as soon as school let out for the day. Attesting to its popularity, there are more than 700 different words and/or phrases originating from the games still in use today.



Playing the Game

It's interesting to note that no one really knows where or how our modern games of marbles originated. The basic games that were played everywhere are a variation of what was called knockout, ringers or potsie. Most kids just called it marbles. In fact, there is a tournament in West Sussex, England to this day that plays ringers. Basically, you make a circle (here's where local rules come into play) three, six or ten feet in diameter (ten feet rarely used in neighborhood and schoolyard games). First, you measure with a yard stick or tape measure then etch a circle in the dirt or draw one with chalk on concrete. Some people use a string. The players decide how many marbles each player will place in the pot (middle of circle). How the marbles in the pot are arranged is according to local custom. Then, a line is drawn outside of the circle and a distance from it is agreed upon where each player will shoot their marble toward the line. The order of play is determined by each player's marble's proximity to the line (this is called lagging). Using a shooter or bomber (a larger marble) the player "knuckles down" at the edge of the ring and shoots their shooter toward the pot with the goal of hitting a marble and sending it out of the ring. Sometimes your shooter is left in the ring or sometimes it's retrieved according to custom. As play continues, participants take and keep (keepsies) any marbles they shoot out of the ring. You never play your most prized marbles unless you are willing to lose them.



History

Based upon archeological excavations and discoveries dating from the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods some historians believe a form of marbles was played with the small rounded pebbles and balls of natural clay that they uncovered. Then while digging in sites attributed to ancient Greeks and Romans, archeologists unearthed "marbles" made of various stones, clay and glass. Stone and small round clay balls have been found throughout Asia, North Africa, North America and many other locations all over the world dating back millennia. According to historical records we know early Romans played a game, using various nuts, that was similar to some of our modern marble games.

Marbles made from polished fragments of crystals, marble, limestone and alabaster among other stones found in quarries, were used in Germany during the 1500's. It was in Germany that the glass balls we know today began being called marbles. Because of the popularity of the games,



the city of Nuremberg became overrun with players. Officials banned playing on it's streets requiring participants to use a meadow outside of town. Glass marbles began being manufactured in Germany in the mid 1800's. Prior to the 20th century almost all glass marbles were handmade in Europe.

In 1905 Martin Christianson revolutionized the industry when he modified a machine he had invented earlier and began mass producing multi-colored highly prized glass marbles. By 1914 M.F. Christianson and Sons Company of Akron, Ohio was producing around 1,150,000 marbles per month. Many other American companies sprang up, notably Peltier Glass Company, Akro Agate and Christianson Agate. By the mid 1950's most manufacturers went out of business or switched to producing glassware and ceramics when Japan flooded the market with popular inexpensive glass Cat's Eye marbles. In America playing marbles all but disappeared by the late 1960's.

Today marbles have become collector's items. The rare ones in pristine condition can fetch anywhere from tens to tens of thousands of dollars. Considering that you could buy a bag of 30 marbles in the 1950's for around 15 cents, \$10-200 per marble sounds like a pretty good return on your investment. So, check out those marbles you may still have tucked away somewhere for old times sake in their original muslin drawstring bag. You never know if one or a few of those "keepsies" could buy something special you've had your eye on.



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