

Mondo Croquet takes over North Park Blocks



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So there's regular croquet.

Colorful little balls. Carved wooden mallets. Dainty wire wickets set just so across smooth emerald lawns. Tea, white pants, the British Empire. Jolly good!

Then there's Mondo Croquet.

Bowling balls. Sledgehammers. Steel rebar wickets that can be pounded into hardened Park Blocks turf. Beverages you're not supposed to talk about. Viking helmets, men in skirts, the very embodiment of keeping Portland weird. Jolly, uh. . .

Well, it's definitely jolly.

Particularly on Sunday afternoon, when the 13th (or possibly 14th) annual Mondo Croquet World Championships played out beneath brilliantly blue skies, just a few feet from the traffic on Northwest Couch Street. With more than 40 participants on hand – enough to warrant the construction of a second course on the far side of the playground – the competition grew tense even before the first competitor earned zombie status and began attacking the other balls.

Actually, let's get to the zombie part later.

For now we'll stick to fundamentals, starting with the moment in 1997 when a Portland Web designer named Stephen Peters helped envision a whole new way for Americans to play Britain's classic lawn sport.

"It was my business partner who said we could probably play croquet with bowling balls and sledgehammers," Peters said a few days before Sunday's big event. "I said, great, let's do it!"

Peters got some rebar, used a telephone pole to bend it into wickets, and called up some friends to help inaugurate the new sport. Another friend, Mike Shkolnik, wrote down the rules, which are almost exactly like regular croquet, with some key differences. For instance, if your bowling ball breaks you clear off everything but the biggest fragment, and keep playing with that.

Also the part about the zombies. Which we'll get to later.

Peters, Shkolnik and friends played a few experimental rounds in various Portland parks, then in late July 1997 held the first annual world championship event in the North Park Blocks. Dozens of friends and followers turned up to play, and Peters judged the afternoon "a huge hit." If only because they hadn't been beset by local thugs or the police.

"We were a little worried that someone wouldn't like us being there," Peters said. "But when it was over one of the local security guards came up and asked us to come back every week because we had frightened off all the drug dealers."

It might have been the sledgehammers that kept the criminals away. Or maybe it was the group's curious attire, which ranged from the very traditional (white garden linens) to the flat-out surreal -- e.g. one woman's operatic gold lamé skirt-and-Viking helmet outfit. Which didn't look nearly as odd as it might have, as she was standing alongside another woman in a crimson Queen of Hearts gown, and just across the pitch from a guy in a black utility kilt (lots of pockets for tools, etc.) and a fire-haired third-grader everyone calls Z, who was wearing the heck out of a fur blouse.

"There's a definite 'Alice in Wonderland' element, though I can't remember how that started," says Peters, who favors traditional linens and a pith helmet, which he sets off with a blazing cigar. "One a guy came dressed as a big sandwich. It definitely adds a new dimension to the game."

Which makes it not that surprising to learn that the Mondo Croquet gang, from Peters on down, stems largely from the Cacophony Society, a barely organized national organization that specializes in what its website calls "pranks, hoaxes and culture jamming." Best known in Portland for its annual SantaCon -- during which hundreds of Saint Nick-clad participants gather to confuse/aggravate/bedazzle innocents in bars, shopping malls and so on -- the society specializes in creating what they alternately call "experiences beyond the mainstream" and, more specifically, "hoaxes, pranks and culture jamming."

Noah Eaton, an intense young man clad for competition in a bright green cycling T-shirt and about 30 multicolored snap bracelets on his arms and legs, calls it "place-making," a kind of performance art that takes public space most people have come to take for granted -- the Park Blocks, say -- and by using it as a backdrop for the absurd, makes them look again and appreciate it afresh.

"Mondo croquet is as much about community as it is about a bunch of people having random fun," Eaton says.

Which is probably the most noble way to describe a crowd bristling with bunny ears, vibrantly colored top hats and other visions from the absurd world beyond Alice's looking glass. "Mallets in Blunderland!" is how local animator S.W. Conser describes the tableau, a turn of phrase he delivers through a wreath of candy-flavored smoke from his long-stemmed pipe.

Indeed, the sledgehammers are swinging, the bowling balls flatten the grass and roll through the rebar. Shkolnik, clad entirely in green from his custom Chuck Taylors to his outsized top hat, exhibits his skills by clearing all the wickets and then re-entering the course as a zombie. At which point he has the power to turn on all the other contestants, killing them instantly with the touch of his ball. Which becomes all the more frantic when other players enter the zombie stage, and turn on him, and the once-stately lawn game becomes a veritable bloodbath of simulated death, destruction and brain-devouring.

But it's all in fun, which is what appeals to David Williams, a Portland newcomer who moved from Hawaii just a few months ago.

"So this is weird Portland, I guess," he says as he watches the attack of the bowling ball zombies. And what does he think of all the eccentric garb and waltz music coming from the megaphone mounted on Peters' classic '74 Volkswagen Thing?

"That really does grab you the most," he notes with a shrug. "But you know what they say -- go big or go home."

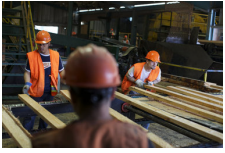
Plus also, it's this kind of bigness that drew Williams, a financial planner, to move his family to this particular corner of the mainland. Because he could live downtown, ride the street car, and walk just a few blocks to find oddly dressed men and women playing croquet with bowling balls.

"This is a city," he decrees. "It's vibrant. A collage of life."

And as the zombie bowling balls roll across the grass Williams and family stroll off to see what else is going on in a city where, obviously, anything can happen.

-- [Peter Ames Carlin](#)

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