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# 9 Mondo Croquet takes over North Park Blocks

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(http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/pacarlin/index.html) By Peter Ames Carlin, The Oregonian

(http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/pacarlin/posts.html)

on July 25, 2010 at 6:04 PM, updated July 26, 2010 at 7:44 AM

Print (http://blog.oregonlive.com/ent\_impact\_home/print.html?entry=/2010/07/mondo\_croquet\_takes\_over\_north.html)



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.

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## Ox named Oregonian's

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

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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 (mailto:petercarlin@news.oregonian.com)

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**mthomaspx****(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/mthomaspx/index.html>)**

#eastofeden - agree exactly. I found myself wondering when I would go down there and watch, or participate, if possible. Whimsy is vastly under-rated in the world today.

 (<http://oregonlive.com/>)

July 26, 2010, 8:31:05 PM PDT

([http://oregonlive.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2010/07/mondo\\_croquet\\_takes\\_over\\_north.html/post/2010-07-27/11558110](http://oregonlive.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2010/07/mondo_croquet_takes_over_north.html/post/2010-07-27/11558110))

· [Reply](#)**eastofeden****(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/jade71/index.html>)**

Not sure what the issue is or where everyone's sense of whimsy went to, but this was a fantastically written article.

 (<http://oregonlive.com/>)

July 26, 2010, 4:39:08 PM PDT

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· [Reply](#)**Peter Ames Carlin, The Oregonian****(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/pacarlin/index.html>)**

Yeah, the anger factor is really something here. I don't do that kind of stuff either, but unless you're a hermit or living under a totalitarian regime that enforces strict adherence to codified standards of behavior, the healthiest route through life involves the good old live-and-let-live.

I totally don't get the swipe at the creative class, either. The participants in Mondo Croquet were actually a compelling mix of folks. Doctors, lawyers, business owners, a filmmaker or two, two or three members of the psychiatric/psychological community, an array of high-tech folks. They have different enthusiasms than many of us, but they still pay taxes. And buy bowling balls.

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July 26, 2010, 2:08:02 PM PDT

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· [Reply](#)**tjd972****(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/tjd972/index.html>)**

Wonderful and light-hearted response, Peter--and great article! Thanks so much! I realize you were probably responding to the perfect comment posted by johnnylawson - I was wondering how were able to respond in only 10 seconds. 😊

Keep up the great work, Mr. Ames Carlin!! These folks sound amazing--exactly the folks that make Portland the greatest place one can choose to call home! I have a huge and ever-growing list of Portland's DIY ventures, environmental firsts, and about 100 other only-in-PDX docs, if you're ever interested. This hilarious new sport just made the list!

 (<http://oregonlive.com/>)

July 26, 2010, 2:15:41 PM PDT

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**tjd972**

(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/tjd972/index.html>)

I think it's wonderful--a cool new sport for PDX!

Meanwhile, the negative, conservative comments of folks like the first three who commented are typical and all too predictable. Plus, user exeterite clearly has no idea what the Chamber of Commerce is about. Google "lewis powell memo" to see the horrific stance of the Chamber of Commerce; it runs directly counter to the creative, artsy, local, DIY, weird, wonderful & whacky spirit displayed by the creators of Mondo Croquet.

These folks actually HAVE created something, which is more than can be said for the vast majority of right-wing lunatic trolls who are getting paid to post comments here. People are attracted to Portland specifically because it's different and doesn't feel like typical suburban Anytown, USA.

Did you even read the article? This funky, only-in-PDX kind of creativity, is exactly what landed the financial planner from Hawaii (not exactly a bad state, either). He loves the vibrancy, the transit, and the crazy, fun, unpredictable things that happen downtown and throughout our amazing neighborhoods.

But none of this will stop you from posting bizarre Tea Party-like comments in your mommy's basement while doing nothing productive with your lives (and making unbelievable grammatical and spelling errors that continually display your ignorance).

Hopefully all of you conservative trolls live far, far away from Portland.



We are all more similar than you think; can't you guys help contribute to a greater, more fun and productive society, rather than complaining all the time?!?

 (<http://oregonlive.com/>)

July 26, 2010, 2:07:18 PM PDT

([http://oregonlive.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2010/07/mondo\\_croquet\\_takes\\_over\\_north.html/post/2010-07-26/11553945](http://oregonlive.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2010/07/mondo_croquet_takes_over_north.html/post/2010-07-26/11553945))

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**johnnylawson**

(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/johnnylawson/index.html>)

Wow, what a sorry lot you all are. Your posts all reek more of self-hatred than anything. At least these people are out their doing something.

Hey, sitting at home in front of the TV watching cars go round and round in a circle is a lot of fun for some people too. I would love to see your input on that.

 (<http://oregonlive.com/>)

July 26, 2010, 2:01:20 PM PDT

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**exeterite**

(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/exeterite/index.html>)

The cheese-like aroma of this article is more akin to Chamber of Commerce promotional prose than to journalism.

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July 26, 2010, 11:29:23 AM PDT

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**tonyko99**

(<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/tonyko99/index.html>)

Wasn't their a special event off by city hall.....how many interns can be stuffed into a bathroom stall by a certain city official? That is one heat that gets whacked... Or the fireman's hurdle, where a former fireman long off the job climbs up a burning building and starts pontificating about the meaning of life according to him.

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July 26, 2010, 4:48:32 AM PDT

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**oregon111**  
 (<http://connect.oregonlive.com/user/oregon111/index.html>)

Dear Orgonian, please do NOT ever tell us again that the 'creative class' creates jobs

Thank You

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