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DODGE CITY

Dodgeball is banned in schools, but a new generation of adults has stepped onto the playground and turned it into a Darwinian battle of wills

~ By ERIKA SCHICKEL ~



Dodgeball is banned in schools, but a new generation of adults has stepped onto the playground and turned it into a Darwinian battle of wills

Inside the Belleview Recreation Center, a boom box thumps out the galloping strains of Heart's "Barracuda" and the air is electric with pumped energy. Eight red and blue rubber kickballs stud the center court line of the spacious gymnasium. On the back court lines two teams of roughly 15 players each wait, one foot forward, waiting to spring into action when the whistle blows. They are dressed in hightops and pigtails. Tube socks are pulled up to kneecaps, terry sweatbands cinch blow-dried hair, and snug, ill-fitting gym shorts abound. One guy is sweating it out in his Cub Scout uniform, looking like an overgrown mama's boy. But these aren't kids. These are grownups with a passion for dodgeball.

Welcome to the Los Angeles Dodgeball Society. With over 400 members, they are a motley assortment of jocks, freaks, dykes, geeks, babes, punks, and working stiffs who meet every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday for some pretty serious consensual balling.



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Dodgeball is back. Now that it is being banned in grammar schools for being too violent, it is seeing a resurgence among adults. Amateur leagues are sprouting up nationwide. In February, the National Amateur Dodgeball Association (NADA) hosted its first national dodgeball tournament exclusively for intramural college and university teams. This month brings the release of Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story, from Twentieth Century Fox, as well as a new series, Extreme Dodgeball, on the Game Show Network. Dodgeball as played by grownups is serious business. But here in L.A., dodgeball is being played with wit, irony, and juvenile glee by the Los Angeles Dodgeball Society.

"I hate dodgeball dicks," says Michael Costanza, a wiry, deadpanning, darkly-bearded, 30-year-old and the founder of the L.A. Dodgeball Society. "There are some groups that take dodgeball a little too seriously and try to make it tight-ass." Costanza is wearing a mullet wig. The Los Angeles Dodgeball Society is a giddy mix of athletics, spoof, and serious competition.

Last August, between gigs as a movie P.A., Costanza was looking for "an activity, not necessarily a 'sport,' where people can go out, have fun, exercise, relieve a little stress." Dodgeball was the answer. Requiring minimal set-up, equipment, or experience, dodgeball fused Costanza's yen for social sport with his fetish for '70s and '80s pop culture. "I don't think I've ever really left the '70s or '80s." The website (Dodgeball4ever.com) is a time-trip to the early '80s, featuring Pac-Man, Burt Reynolds, and Tattoo from Fantasy Island.

The Los Angeles Dodgeball Society plays a strictly old-school game using the classic 8-inch vulcanized rubber balls that have a Proustian metallic ring when they hit the gym floor – a sound that's as familiar to the American ear as lawn sprinklers on a summer night.

While official groups play with regulation, soft, "rhino skin" balls, and have rule books thick enough to stun an actual rhino, the LADS (an acronym Costanza dislikes) game prides itself for being exactly the same as the one we played as third-graders. Two teams line up on either side of a gym and six-to-eight balls are placed on the center court line. At the whistle you try to grab a ball without being hit or pulled over the line. You throw the balls at the other team. If you are hit by a ball, you're out. If someone on the other team catches the ball you threw, you're out. If you step over the line, you're out. If you're out, you're eliminated. This is where the LADS game diverges from the game we remember: When someone on your team catches a ball, the first person on the elimination line is rotated back into the game. "You're not going to just sit on the sidelines and watch everybody else play and be sad and cry," Costanza reassures.

It's the crying on the sidelines that many of us remember most painfully, and what prompted educators to ban it from elementary schools. Neil Williams, the chairman of the Health and Physical Education Department at Eastern Connecticut State University, wasn't far off when he called dodgeball a "Darwinian battle where only the strong survive and the weak just get pummeled."

If grade school dodgeball placed you low on the Darwinian food chain, the LADS offers a chance to rewrite the record. "Our game is all about redemption and second chances," says Costanza. "You've grown up, you're more mature, and you've got a little more self-esteem. It's not going to be as traumatic as a game, and you don't have to be the best athlete to excel."

That was part of the draw for Damion Stephens, a love-handled 29-year-old from Hollywood, who is a regular. "I was looking for a soccer league, but everyone was better than me. I can't play basketball. If it's an organized sport, this is about all I can do. It's good exercise, it's

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competitive, and it's fun."

Strength isn't mandatory in dodgeball. "If you're a bad dancer," Costanza observes, "that correlates to being a good dodgeball player. It helps to flail and leap around. We've actually tested the hypothesis by just dancing for a game. You can stay in for pretty much the whole time if your dancing is really bad."

Gregory James hated dodgeball as a kid. "I grew up in an Amish community, and [being] the only English kid I was the first one they'd try to get out. The Amish used to beat the crap out of me." He's since grown into a solid, tightly muscled man, who is a three-time winner of the NADA championship, held annually in Shaumburg, Illinois. "Dodgeball takes some really quick thinking, fast, agile, skinny, people."

Tobias McKinney, the poster boy for the league, looks like a Boy Scout who's been stretched on a rack. At 6'5" he perfectly embodies the geek esthetic carefully nurtured by The Society. A gangly stick figure with milk-fed good looks, he boasts, "I disappear when I turn sideways. That works for me." On the dodgeball court he is poetry in motion, his bony axles and ball joints somehow gathering into grace.

McKinney, an actor by trade, frequently shows up to games in costume. If he's not dressed in his signature vintage poly athletic wear, then he's Saddam Hussein fresh from his spider hole, or a suited, aviator-framed, masked man. McKinney has snagged some choice acting gigs by being the face of Los Angeles dodgeball, and appears in both *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* and *Extreme Dodgeball*.

Wherever dodgeball and Hollywood intersect, Costanza and McKinney are not far away. The Game Show Network hopes to cash in with *Extreme Dodgeball*, a show that mixes the theater of professional wrestling with the hotshot moves of pro basketball. Eight costume-themed teams vie for a \$10,000 cash prize. GSN tapped the Society for players and Costanza and McKinney found themselves cast as accountants on the "Certified Public Assassins" team. "Others had brawn, but we used brains and tendon as our asset," Costanza explains. The high stakes made the low-key Costanza nervous. He describes being backstage waiting for a match with knots in his stomach and thinking, "Wow, this is all the bad anxiety that I thought I left behind in high school."

If the Los Angeles Dodgeball Society has a mission, it is to deflate any seriousness that may have seeped into dodgeball. Asked by Twentieth Century Fox to stage a game alongside the red carpet for this week's premiere of its movie, Costanza is planning a little prankish fun. As the game caller, he says he'll refer to all players as, "The Assman." "Here comes Rebecca 'The Assman' Pontius!" He further plans to de-elevate the proceedings by making each call the same: "Oh no, it looks like he/she's been hit in the penis!"

"We do encourage people to throw at genitalia," McKinney admits. "Aim low," is often the first and only piece of strategy you will get from a fellow player. "If you get hit in the head, you're not out," Costanza explains. "If you get hit in the genitals you are out and that's just funny."

"Yeah, ball humor is one of the great pleasures of playing with the Los Angeles Dodgeball Society," McKinney concurs. "Balls flying at my face," is a much loved and oft-used refrain, as are references to the blue balls the game is played with. Boy-centric jokes apparently also drive *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*. Costanza says early reviews cite the movie for trading in "juvenile, playground humor." He pauses, reflecting for a moment. "It seemed like they were trying to say that was a bad thing."

Back at the Rec Center, the game is now down to 10 guys against one girl with a swifty, blonde ponytail and bright, green eyes. The men circle cagily, prowling the center court line, preparing to attack. This is the point where a grown-up might intervene, sending the boys back to class before this girl gets seriously hurt. But this “girl” is Laura Farley, a 32-year-old Ameriplan Broker from Orange County and a bold, aggressive player in her own right. She probably won’t cry if she should get slammed in the face by a dodgeball, which leaves a nubby imprint on your lips that can burn for hours. That’s called “the freshly fucked face,” Costanza says, because you look like “you’ve had some crazy, rough sex. Your face is aglow, you’re a little lightheaded, and a single tear runs down your cheek.”

Playing dodgeball can be both a sobering and an exhilarating experience for women. Confronting limitations in upper body strength as well as a yen to keep up with the boys, a feminist must make peace with the fact that sometimes she serves her team best by passing her ball off to a guy. A woman’s game is more about strategy and teamwork than brute force. “What [women] lack in strength they make up in intelligence and patience, which is just as dangerous as any guy,” Stephens observes. “There isn’t a guy here who hasn’t been hit out by a girl.” Costanza agrees: “Some ‘15 of the girls are die-hard and awesome with a sneaky technique.” He’d like to see more women playing.

Dodgeball is definitely not a game for yoginis. In fact, its current popularity may signal the coming of a long-overdue yoga backlash. For all of its light-heartedness, there is a current of aggression that runs through the game, making it feel like *Fight Club* for vegetarians. “I like being able to wail a ball at somebody,” Farley grins. Dodgeball requires cunning, adrenaline, and a touch of testosterone. “Testosterone definitely helps,” Costanza allows, “but we try to curb it a little by playing the Barry Manilow and Neil Diamond.”

Farley girds herself and all at once the males surge and strike, sending out a barrage of balls. Farley leaps and twists in the air. Balls ricochet crazily around her. Miraculously, she is not hit. There is a stunned silence, then a cheer goes up from her team. This is the uncanny ballet of dodgeball, where anyone can be, for a moment, a superhero. Farley turns to retrieve a ball as one last, unseen ball hurtles across the line and smacks her in the thigh, ending the game.

“Winning is for Losers,” the unofficial Society slogan goes. Nobody keeps score or remembers who won, later, when they all go out for a postgame beer. New players are always welcomed and veteran players are good friends. “Dodgeball promotes maximum social enjoyment,” NADA proclaims on its website. The Los Angeles Dodgeball Society is glorious proof of that.

Costanza and McKinney dream of doing a traveling dodgeball tour where they could meet like-minded people and get games going in other cities. “We’d have ’80s bands play and it would be a festive party/carnival thing,” Costanza says. All of that takes time, effort, and corporate sponsorship. Oddly, Adidas and Tab haven’t taken the bait yet. Costanza isn’t worried. “I don’t think this is a fad. I see dodgeball as being around for a while.” Meanwhile, he and McKinney continue to dream big. “Tobias and I would like to be the first people to play dodgeball on the moon. We’re trying to partner up with Lance Bass.”



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