

THE NATIONAL MARBLE MUSEUM
at the
MUSEUM OF AMERICAN GLASS
in
WEST VIRGINIA

KINGS (AND QUEENS) OF THE RING

Early Days of the US National Marbles Tournament
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by Stan Flewelling



Not many people today have heard of the **US National Marbles Tournament**. Not much is written about it anymore. Sometimes it pops up as a feature in a kids' magazine or TV show. A handful of newspapers run back-page stories about the finals in June each year. But playing marbles these days usually comes off as something cute and quaint, and above all, obsolete. For all the enthusiasm that spins around marble collecting in our time, it's just a small core of fans who still play the game and pass it on to new generations. It wasn't always so.

The **National Marbles Tournament** is probably the oldest surviving nationwide contest for kids. It was wildly popular years before juvenile favorites like **Little League**, the **Soap Box Derby**, or the **National Spelling Bee** ever got going. From the start, the tourney was open to any kid that fit its age limits, without gender restrictions (though marbles was generally considered a boys' game) or color barriers (it was integrated a quarter-century before Jackie Robinson's famed debut with the Dodgers). In 1929, one New Jersey official praised the role of his Chamber of Commerce in the tourney by assuring them, "*There is no convention that I know of, outside of possibly the great national political conventions, that attracts so much attention and so much publicity as does this tournament.*"

Today, even most marble enthusiasts know little about this heritage. Whatever they do know is often cloaked in myth and misinformation. In its heyday, the tournament inspired massive amounts of prose in the form of newspaper copy. That literature is still around, but hard to reach, buried in microfilm in countless libraries. Unlike the flood of collectors' information now giving attention and publicity to the *objects* of the game, the focus in those days was on the *players* - the "regular" kids from all walks of life - who, through their marble-shooting skills, became heroes to children and adults alike.

Marbles, after all, are *toys* - some of the oldest and simplest ones known to humankind. And toys are the tools of childhood. Popular around the world in one form or another since ancient times, marble games were always the

domain of children: "a game so simple that it can be played by any[one], yet so skillful that no adult ever yet has been able to win consistently, if at all, from a player half his age," claimed one writer nearly 80 years ago. (Rolley Hole fans in Tennessee and Kentucky have every reason to argue with that writer today.) Mature sports like golf, bowling, and billiards evolved from marbles, not the other way around.

Marble lore claims that spheroid toys were almost universal playthings for generations of American youth - boys, at least. Native Americans played marble games for ages, as did people of all backgrounds who migrated to the New World. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln - they all played marbles. *Anyone* could play, since a budget of pennies would buy all the supplies you needed, which could easily be carried around in pockets or clacking draw-string sacks. Any reasonably flat piece of dirt or pavement would do for play space.

BUSTER

But marbles had a mixed reputation at the turn of the 20th Century. Kids usually played for "keeps," meaning a winner's prize was the right to "cop" the "mibs" he or she had won and take them home. It was gambling, plain and simple, and in the prevailing atmosphere of reform - which had brought issues like abolition, women's suffrage, prohibition, and child labor before the public, gambling was a sure road to ruin. Caring parents and educators tried to discourage marbles or at least see that the games stayed safe and fun for everyone.

Several urban playground directors around the country organized marble tournaments in the early 1900s. They stressed sportsmanship and the honor of winning - or losing - with no more reward than a cheer, a pat on the back, and maybe a modest trophy.

Then in 1922, the Jersey City (NJ) Director of Parks, A. Harry Moore, was inspired to turn his town's local playground tournaments into a series of playoffs for a city-wide championship. (A few years later, Moore became the governor of New Jersey.) When the Jersey City winner, a burly, street-wise 14 year-old named Charles "Buster" Rech was eventually crowned, he wasted no time daring anyone else "in the universal earth" to beat him.



Buster Rech and other 1922 Jersey City playground champions

Washington DC tourney officials took the challenge. Politicians all over town, including President Harding, expressed their interest in the contest as did the news media. A few weeks later, 14 year-old Mike Troiano emerged as the DC winner and was escorted to Union Station where he (and a reporter) boarded a train for the big showdown in Jersey City. Buster Rech won hands down before a crowd of some 10,000 fans, a 50-piece brass band, 40 news reporters, and several movie cameras. His ecstatic sponsors now declared Buster the *world's* first marble champion. (Little did they know that an annual "world's championship" in the British village of Tinsley Green had already been a tradition for some 300 years.)

INTER-CITY MATCH

Meanwhile, the city of Philadelphia, PA, was running its own city-wide tournament involving thousands of kids of its own in playoff games. In mid-May, 1922, Philly organizers invited other municipal champions to join them in an "inter-city match." (Contrary to common folklore, Macy's Department Store had nothing in particular to do with it.) The challenge was picked up by three other cities: Baltimore, New York City, and Newark, NJ. The first two ran tourneys of their own. Newark's mayor, however, simply put out a call for a boy to represent the town in the inter-city match. No one stepped forward. Then a spunky 17 year-old girl named Marjorie Ruth - known as "Babe" to all her sports-loving friends - wrote a letter to the mayor bidding for the honor. Once the surprised city fathers could verify her shooting skills, Babe Ruth was sent off to Philadelphia with their blessings.

Next-door in Jersey City, Buster Rech and his mentors scorned the inter-city contest. He was *already* the world champion they proclaimed and all challengers should come meet him on his own turf. They wouldn't be budged, so on Saturday, May 20, 1922, the Philadelphia tournament got underway at City Hall Plaza without him. In a round-robin series of duels an unflappable 12 year-old from Baltimore, Frank McQuade Jr., edged out Philadelphia's William "Red" Stoddart for the victory. (With apologies to writer Paul Dickson and many others, the exalted McQuade "half-marble shot" of marble lore never happened!) Babe Ruth was a distant 3rd and New York's hapless Nicky Markoff last.



Scenes from the 1922 Inter-city Tournament in Philadelphia. Newark's Marjorie "Babe" Ruth (L) and Philadelphia's William "Red" Stoddart (R) show their shooting style, but in the end, Baltimore's Frank McQuade Jr. (C) won the trophy

They crowned Frank McQuade the "national champion," which kept the feud going between his Baltimore boosters and Buster Rech's crowd in Jersey City. The two champs threw some friendly barbs at each other through the press, but never scrapped. Meanwhile that spring and summer, marble championships became all the rage. Several more towns held their own playoffs and winners were plugged like prizefighters. The contests were fun, but the bragging got more and more out of hand. For one thing, different games prevailed in different cities. Home towns decided which game would be used in their own tournaments launching big arguments about which game was superior. Buster Rech specialized in "**Fats**," a warlike game full of risk and drama; Frankie McQuade's strength was "**Ringer**" which was considered a game of skill and strategy.

NATIONALS

A solution to all the chaos finally came from a news organization. Editors of the **Scripps-Howard newspaper** chain met for a conference and one item they discussed was how a national marbles championship could be settled. They decided to sponsor a *truly* national tournament in 1923 inviting winners from contests all over the United States to participate. Any boy or girl could enter, but none could be older than 14. The official tournament game would be "**Ringer**." Qualifying tournaments would be sponsored by **Scripps-Howard newspapers**, or other papers, or city recreation departments. Sponsors would pay the way for their champs (and adult chaperones) to get to the national championship site which would be the spectacular amusement center of Atlantic City, New Jersey - "America's Playground" - the Disney World of its day.

From the outset, the national playoffs idea was a hit. 40 cities signed up by the spring deadline including eight from Pacific Coast states. Each sponsor began to recruit participants usually through newspaper ads and articles. Thousands of kids in each town responded. Hoping to improve on his 1922 Inter-city Champion title, Frank McQuade entered, excelled, and then lost to another boy in the Baltimore city finals. Throughout the spring of 1923 as other local champs emerged, reports and photos beamed out through news wires to the entire country. Excitement snowballed everywhere - which, of course, was noted and exploited by each sponsoring paper. Nothing of this scope had ever been offered to the nation's youth before.

By late June, 1923, 40 city champs, all boys, were en route to their Washington, DC rendezvous point with parents or older siblings, plus reporters in tow. They came from many backgrounds, cultures, social classes. Two were African-American (New York and Chicago), two Hispanic (Los Angeles and San Francisco), several Jewish, or orphans, or from families of new immigrants. All traveled by train, some for the first time in their lives. West Coast contestants rode for four continuous days and nights. On Sunday, June 24, after a whirlwind tour of the Nation's Capital, the entire party boarded another train to Atlantic City. They were received like royalty then dispersed to several of the finest resort hotels around. Whenever they ventured out to eat or to try the hundreds of amusement arcades made freely available to them. They were celebrities. Tourists from "back home" stopped them on the boardwalk expressing congratulations and encouragement, offering shooting tips, begging signatures, slipping cash

gifts into their hands.

The competition began on Tuesday and after two days of playoffs, regional champs from five cities reigned: Allentown, PA, Columbus, OH, St. Louis, MO, Ft. Worth, TX, and Tacoma, WA. After Thursday's semi-finals, two contenders were left: Harlin McCoy, 14, from Columbus, and Sammy Schneider, 11, from St. Louis. One of the youngest, shortest (at an even 4 feet), and most gregarious boys in the tourney, Schneider was a crowd favorite. His parents owned a department store at home. McCoy, the son of a railroad switchman, was known in his neighborhood for a whole medley of traits: "school sports hero," "regular fellow," "100 per cent American boy."



Harlin McCoy,
1923 National Champ

In the dramatic finals played out before some 5000 spectators, Harlin triumphed. His calm consistency seemed to rattle the younger boy and Sammy's sharp-shooting fell apart. Once it was all over, fans rushed the champ and hoisted him on their shoulders, chanting "He's the King! He's the King!" Nearly lost in the crowd, Sammy wept. Pulling himself together, he squirmed through the throng and shook the victor's hand.



Sammy Schneider,
1923 Runner-up

All of Columbus celebrated. When Harlin McCoy's train pulled into town a few days later, 10,000 citizens greeted the hero. He was entertained every day for two weeks. "Columbus is the home of monarchs," claimed the local paper.

The previous September, a Columbus teenager Katherine Campbell had been crowned the national "Queen of Beauty" in Atlantic City. She was only the second young woman to win that title, the first since it had been opened to candidates around the nation. She won again in 1923, and the contest eventually became better known as the "Miss America Pageant."

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