

August 2005

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photos by Ray Savicunas

Akron Life & Leisure

For all the marbles

Akron youngsters are going marbles over marbles, thanks to a local artist who did some digging and discovered why our city has a permanent place in marble history.

Champion mibster Alexa Norton normally welcomes a little friendly competition, especially in a game of marbles. This time, though, she got a little more than she expected.

“Why me? I don’t want to play my own brother,” she groans after realizing that she and older brother Ryan will compete with two other players in the third round of the Akron District Marbles Tournament.



The Akron tournament dates back to 1923 when 12-year-old Isadore Freed beat out eight other contestants to become Akron's first champion mibster. Long before hosting its first tournament, Akron was immersed in marble mania. The Akron-marble connection began with the onset of the modern American toy industry in 1884

when Samuel G. Dyke, an Akron native, became the first person to mass-produce a toy: the clay marble. Finally, there was a toy children could afford to buy with their own money. Toy marble production boomed, and it seemed everyone was in the marble-making business.

Despite competition, Dyke stayed on top of the trend, and in 1891 he founded The American Marble & Toy Manufacturing Company, which produced 1,000,000 marbles a day and ranked as the largest toy company in the United States during the 19th century. The company's life ended

As the game begins, Alexa uses her blue-and-white-swirled shooter while Ryan hangs on to his lucky green shooter. “I hit my own brother,” Alexa shouts with astonishment after nailing Ryan’s shooter to score a point. But Ryan, last year’s All American Marble Tournament winner, doesn’t give up easily, and like typical siblings, the two take part in some good-natured ribbing.

“Whenever I get a point, he gets a point,” Alexa wails with a laugh on this sweltering summer day.



Akron mibsters Ryan and Alexa Norton



“Exactly! You ain’t gonna beat me,” Ryan playfully replies with a cocky grin. After seven nerve-racking rounds of marble shooting, Ryan and Alexa tie, which mandates brother versus-sister battle to determine the winner. The youngsters gather at the pitch line, and Alexa wins the lag, her crystal-blue eyes sparkling. Tension mounts, and the kids love every second of it. This excitement is why Ryan is missing his baseball game and Alexa her softball game. As Alexa says, “That’s how big this is.” For Ryan, the sacrifice just seems sensible. “It’s really fun to do,” he explains. “And also, you have a lot more [baseball] games. This is just once a year.”

Alexa Norton

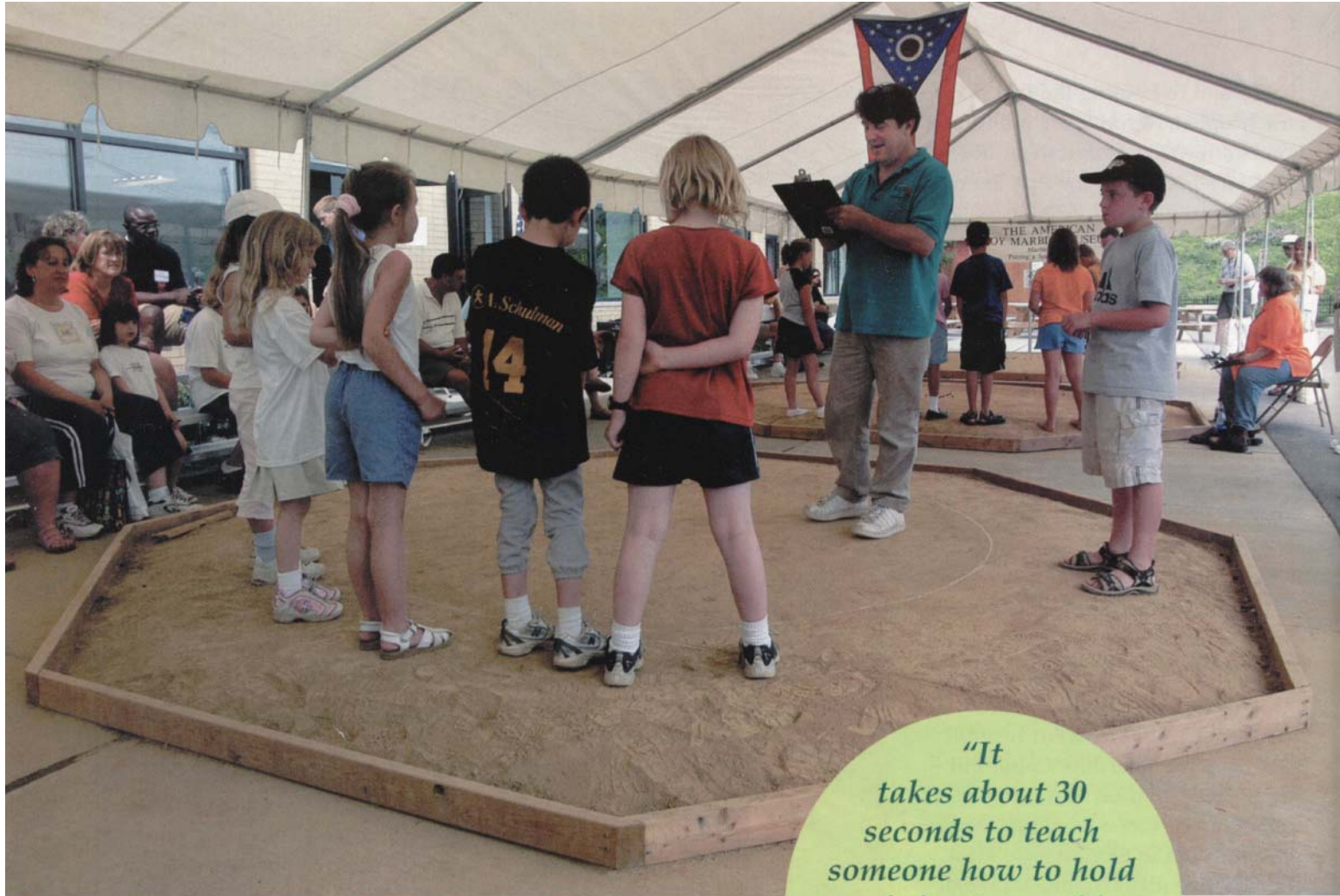
Tournament director Michael Cohill wants to ensure that the yearly tradition continues and that Akron’s marble history never again goes forgotten. At one time, the Greater Akron area boasted 32 marble factories, but the booming rubber tire industry overshadowed Akron’s playful side. Most people seemed to have lost sight of Akron’s affair with the modern toy industry until a passionate toy maker and artist (Cohill) leased some property

Through his research, Cohill realized that Akron is responsible for more than just the modern toy industry. “The greatest gift Akron has given to the nation is the knowledge of childhood as we know it today,” he says. “The reason it started in Akron is because the community had an extraordinary sensitivity to children and childhood.”

In addition to housing one of the first pediatric hospitals, Akron was the publishing home of the first American-authored children’s picture books and the first public schools and Sunday schools. “I’ve been studying those occurrences as much as I’ve been researching marbles,” Cohill adds. And that’s a lot. Cohill has been immersed in marbles-literally, the guy has two tons in his garage - since he established The American Toy Marble Museum 16 years ago. Despite more than a decade of studying, Cohill has only researched through 1940. But that hasn’t stopped him from completing several manuscripts about famous mibsters and what he refers to as the “Golden Age of Marbles.”

Ryan Norton





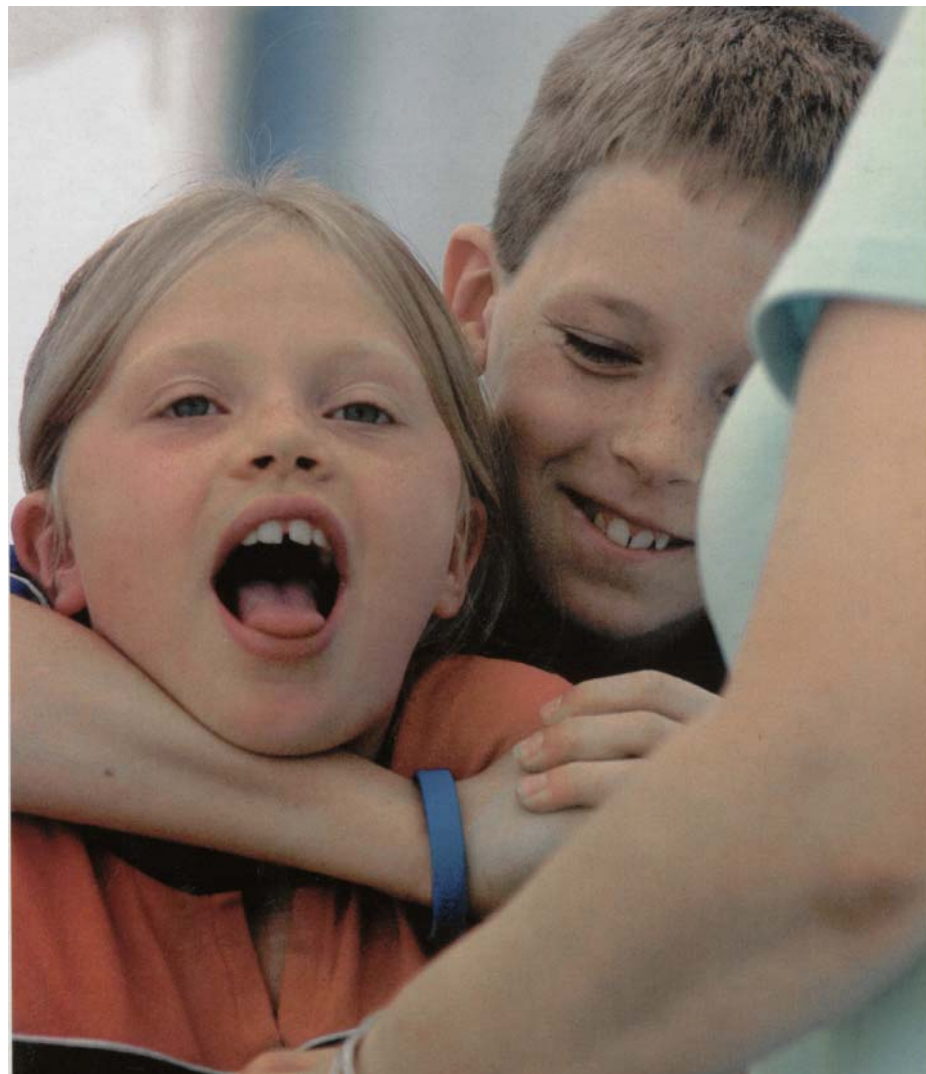
"It takes about 30 seconds to teach someone how to hold and shoot a marble. Somebody needs to do that, and then it's theirs forever"

A natural artist, Cohill has drawn and painted since he was 7, and attended the California Art Institute on a Disney scholarship. Cohill still designs toys from his Akron home studio, but he says a lot of his inventions turn out to be expensive art if they can't be manufactured and marketed inexpensively. "Toys can be fantastic fun," he says, "and I consider what I do an art form. What I do with kids and marbles is art."

It's his love of art and affinity for children that move Cohill to devote so much time to the museum, which is a nonprofit organization. "It's not about making profit; it's about something grander," he says. "It takes about 30 seconds to teach someone how to hold and shoot a marble. Somebody needs to do that, and then it's theirs forever."

So far this year, Cohill has taught nearly 5,000 children to play marbles. He has worked with the public schools, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and the YMCA. At Christmastime, 18,000 people toured the museum, 30 percent of whom were children. "More children are playing marbles in Akron than in all the other cities in the United States combined," Cohill says.

Lately, Cohill's focus has been on teaching adults how to teach the game to children. People came from Pennsylvania and California to observe this year's Akron District Marbles Tournament. "We're focusing on California because fads start there," Cohill explains. "We're hoping that in a year or two..., we'll have enough of these satellite museums set up and can have a national tournament here in Akron, the marble capital."



New Jersey currently hosts a national tournament, but its numbers are dwindling. Cohill suspects it might have something to do with the intensity of that tournament and the pressure put on its participants. He hopes to keep Akron's tournaments more playful and light-hearted. "If marbles are going to stay alive in the United States, it has to be a fun game," he says. "We don't particularly care if the kids become national champions; we just want them to play." And they do. Each year, the Akron tournament gains popularity. Expert players like Ryan and Alexa showcase their skills and battle to determine who will take home the first-place trophy, overflowing with marbles. But that doesn't stop amateur mibsters from joining in the fun, too. They come and learn from the veterans who are more than happy to share their knowledge of the game.

Although the purpose of the tournament is to have fun, it's still very official business. Before the competition begins, Cohill and Museum Board President Brian Graham prepare the dirt as if they were preparing an infield for a baseball game. They redraw the game circle, lag and pitch lines. Signs serve as gentle reminders to players: "Ring Rules: Leave no footprints. Smooth sole shoes only. Bare feet OK."

The targets in this year's tournament are 13 black, opaque marbles, five eighths of an inch in diameter. Because it's an American marble game, shooters must be three-fourths of an inch in diameter, no larger. Cohill says American shooters are difficult to find in this area because most stores carry foreign-made marbles. The difference is the foreign marbles, known in the United States as boulders, are larger than the domestic variety. Although American shooters are scarce in this area, they are available for purchase di-

rectly from the museum or at the Web site (www.akronmarbles.com).

The marbles the museum sells are actually made in a glass factory outside of Marietta, Ohio, and Cohill buys them by the ton in order for the company to still manufacture them (hence the two tons of marbles in his garage). Someday, Cohill would like to mass-produce marbles using the museum's glass furnace from the 1930s, but that will take some time. He wants to perfect the process before making it public. Right now, the marbles he produces are just for collectors and cost about \$20 apiece.

Until the museum's marble factory is running full-force, entering marble tournaments is an easy way to acquire handfuls of marbles, just ask Ryan, who has about 800, and Alexa, who has 700. Every contestant in this year's tournament took home a bag of marbles, and the winners' trophies were also filled to their tops. But in order to take home the trophies, players have to aim for each other's shooters and knock out as many marbles as they can to earn the most points. "It's all about the points," Graham says while officiating. "There's no shame in points."

There's no shame in a history rooted in Akron, either, and word is getting around. "Marbles help define who we are as a people. It's a fun bit of history," Cohill says proudly. "It's nice to be able to refer to the community as a place where marbles started."

* Alexa Norton was the 2006 Akron Girl's Marbles Champion, and that year her brother Ryan was the Boy's Runner-up.