

# Marbles

"Knuckles down, no hunching, and play for keepers."

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**  
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

## Do you recall those instructions

when gathered around a school yard marble ring? How about plunkers, cat eyes, and shooters? Everyone can relate to playing marbles. In fact, variations of the game were enjoyed by Egyptians and Romans centuries before youngsters in this country huddled around hand-drawn circles filled with clay marbles.

Organized marbles competition in the United States began when a non-profit organization called the National Marbles Tournament Inc. hosted a national tournament in Ocean City, New Jersey. Ninety years later, the tournament still attracts marbles champions from around the country, although the tournament location is now Wildwood, New Jersey.

Rules for playing marbles are not difficult to master. All tournaments operate under rules of a game called “Ringer.” A 10 foot diameter ring surrounds 13 marbles that are placed in the center and arranged in the shape of an equal sided cross. The players, referred to as mibsters, must keep their “knuckles down” (on the ground) when they shoot. The first player to knock seven marbles from the ring is declared the winner.



**Facing page: Mibster Briana Brode keeps her “knuckles down” (on the ground) while shooting in proper tournament competition rules.**

**Above right: Marbles lined up in an equal sided cross to begin each game.**

In 1933, excitement in marbles was generated locally when the *Cumberland Times-News* supported the national marbles tournament by organizing competitions at schools under the direction of employee J. William Hunt. Rules were basic and easily understood; the youngest contestants had to be enrolled in the third grade and the oldest could participate up to the age of 14. No money for entry fees was required, and according to newspaper reports, youngsters only needed a shooter (a favorite marble used by the player to knock marbles from the ring) and clay marbles to participate. Girls were welcomed.

Schools embraced the tournament and hosted spirited contests that were frequently reported by the newspaper.



**Spectators enjoy the local tournament finals at Constitution Park in Cumberland, Maryland. The finalists travel to Wildwood, New Jersey for the National Marbles Tournament each year.**

Regularly participating schools during the 1930s included Midland, Columbia Street, Johnson Heights, Humbird, Greene Street Junior High, Hammond Street, Eckhart, McCoolle, Penn Avenue Junior High, LaSalle, St. Patrick’s Corriganville, Oldtown, Cresaptown, Ellerslie, LaVale, Luke, Bruce, Sts. Peter and Paul and Union Street.

School winners advanced to the local championship tournament held during the month of June at Community Ballpark located along Wineow Street in South Cumberland. Large crowds witnessed the event and followed the brackets as winners advanced. The 1937 participants were particularly rewarded by receiving free admission to the Strand Theatre, white yachting



**Marble Tournament rings at Gephart Elementary School, circa early 1960s. Photo courtesy Dan Whetzel.**

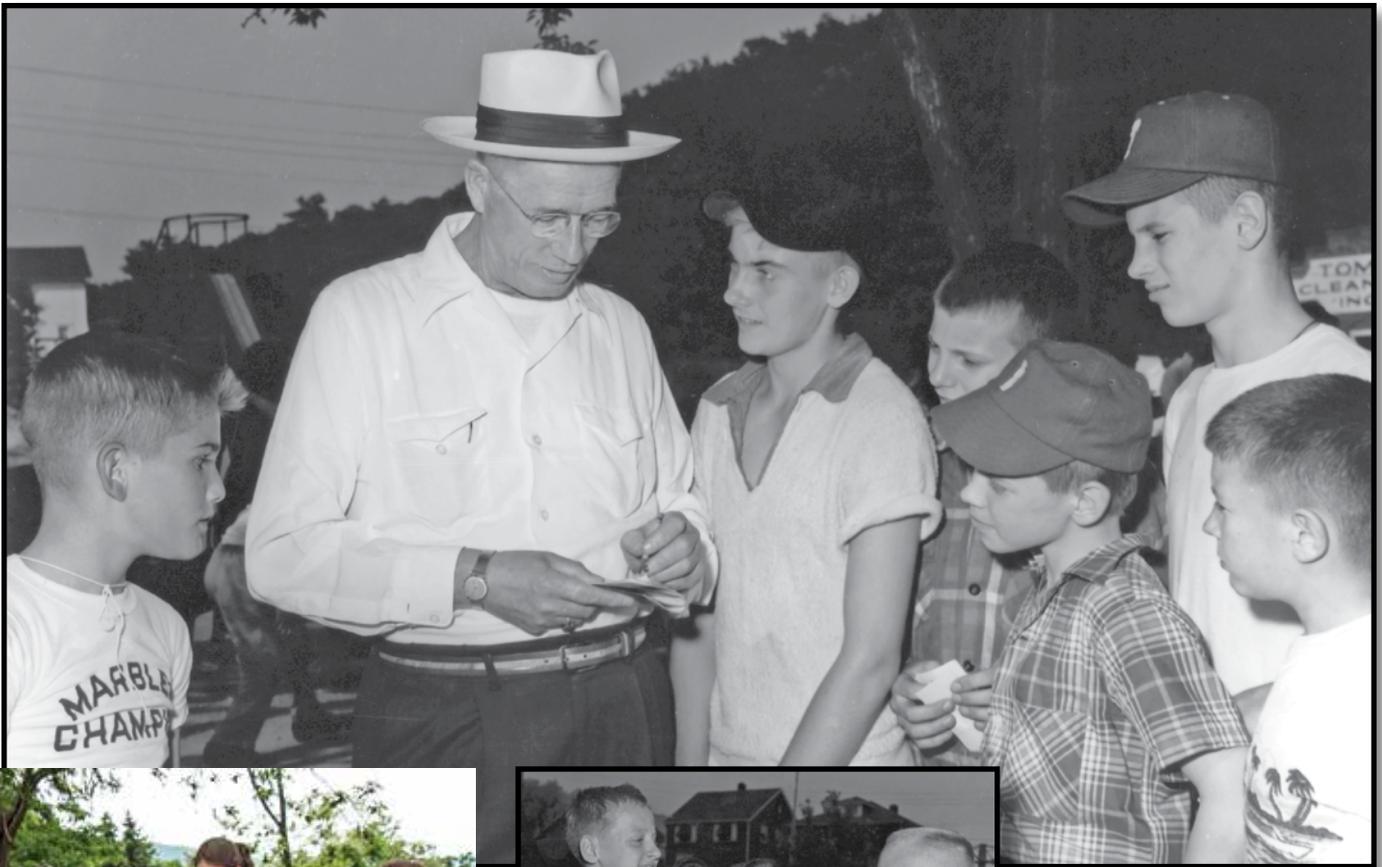
hats, unlimited ice cream treats, and a grand reception at Baltimore and Liberty Streets, featuring two high school bands. Impressive luncheons at the Fort Cumberland Hotel were also regular features of pre war competitions. Champions in the early years were Boyd Mertens, John Ratke, Wallace Ullery, and Ray Kamauf.

The City of Cumberland Recreation Department assumed control of the marbles tournament in 1959. According to Gene Mason, long time Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Cumberland, “When the newspaper dropped the sponsorship, our phones started ringing. Parents, school principals, and students made it clear the tournament was a good program, and the city would be performing a great service if it would run the event. We decided to assume the responsibilities and the city has sponsored the tournament ever since.”

According to Mr. Mason, teachers organized the school events. Each school declared a winner who would advance and participate in the city



**Photos at Left (top to bottom): Brandon Robinett concentrates on his follow through. Aleah Spencer watches her shot. Dayna Lashley, Kayla Wamsley, and Aleah Spencer racking the marbles to start a game.**



Former National Champions Rick Brode (left) and Rick Mawhinney demonstrate lagging to determine who will shoot first in the tournament game. Onlookers (left to right): Alexis Lashbaugh, Hailey Jenkins, Diane Johnson (*Director of Parks & Recreation*), Nicole Morral, and Briana Brode.



Elementary school marble tournament participants were greeted by the greatest left-handed pitcher in baseball history, Lonaconing resident Robert Moses "Lefty" Grove.

Inset: Del Proudfoot (right), City Marbles Tournament Champion, 1959.

*Both photos courtesy Dan Whetzel.*

tournament. "The first few years we held the city tournament on clay rings at Gephart Elementary School. We then made concrete rings at Constitution Park, and that is where the tournaments have been held since the mid 1960s."

Mr. Mason also became involved in the national tournament program as a result of chaperone duties for local winners. "I eventually became National Director and held the position until 2003 when I retired. "Although retired, Mr. Mason maintains contact with the national event. "This year was my 50<sup>th</sup> national tournament."

Another key person in the development of the local program was Delbert Proudfoot. As Mr. Mason recalled, "Del Proudfoot's son was the city champion in 1959, so he accompanied us to the national tournament. Del was so impressed that he asked if he could be a volunteer coach for the local program. I readily accepted his offer! Del was a great coach and mentor."

Cumberland's mibster program proudly proclaims eight national winners: **Rick Mawhinney** (1973), **Jeff Rice** (1976), **Jeff Kimmell** (1981), **Mike**

**Moore** (1982), **Patricia Kimmell** (1983), **Amy Thompson** (1985), **Dawn Lancaster** (1991), and **Ricky Brode** (2005). Nearby Ridgeley, WV also had two national champions, although they did not come through the Cumberland program: **Lori Dickel** (1987) and **Carl Whitacre** (1990).

Diane Johnson is the current Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Cumberland and has been involved in the marbles competition since the 1980s. According to Diane, the game continues to attract youngsters. "This year we had eight schools and ten students compete in the city event. We appreciate the teachers and counselors who get the kids excited about the marbles program. We also appreciate the Rick Mawhinney family who has helped coordinate the local marbles program." Rick Mawhinney, the 1973 National Champion, has also succeeded Gene Mason as the National Chairman for the Wildwood Tournament. Major financial support has come from local civic and business organizations.

Diane Johnson is confident that marbles will continue to be a successful event for Allegany County youngsters. "We are planning to continue the program. We give credit to educators, volunteers, and business partners that continue to make our marbles program a success."

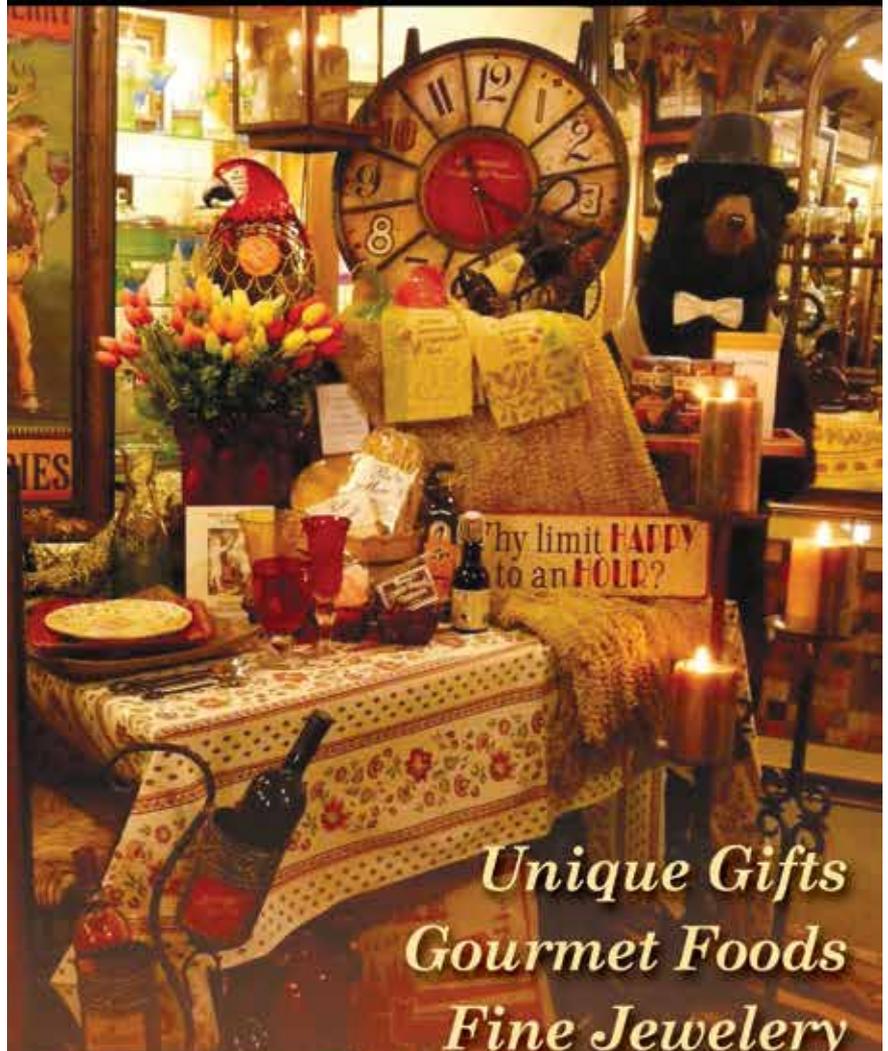
For more information, please visit [www.nationalmarblestournament.org](http://www.nationalmarblestournament.org).



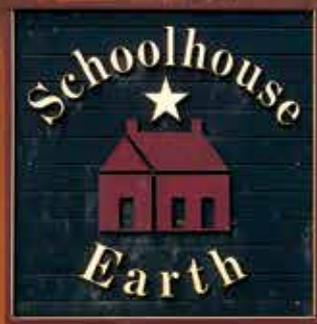
**1983 National Girls Marble Champion, Patricia Kimmell shows Maryland Congresswoman, Beverly Byron the proper way to shoot marbles.**

Photo courtesy Diane Johnson

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