

duck, dip, dive and dodge to health

BY THOMAS LEGGETT



In a musty old gym, the captain of your middle school football team—you remember, the one two years older than everyone else because he failed a few grades—eases along a blue tumbling mat, a red ball firmly gripped behind him. He steps forward, his angry snarl directed at your best friend and teammate, but at the last second he turns, steps forward and unleashes all his pre-adolescent fury by hurling the ball directly at your face as you wince in horror to a chorus of laughter. For many of us, the sport of dodgeball conjures images like these from fading memories of P.E. classes. But in recent years, fueled by Hollywood as well as nostalgia, adults have begun rediscovering the excitement and health benefits dodgeball has to offer.

On Thursday nights, more than eighty young professional adults gather in a spotless, state-of-the-art gymnasium at Andrew Wilson Charter School in New Orleans to enjoy the thrill of throwing rubber-coated foam balls at each other. Bright yellow, blue, orange and red

balls fly across the room amid the din of elated shouts and referee whistles. Balls whiz by in a blur and smack exposed skin. Others slam into walls with a thud, keeping every player in a state of constant motion. In the end, everyone shakes hands and laughs over a beer at a nearby watering hole. Sponsored by PlayNOLA, a local organization (www.playnola.com), this co-ed dodgeball league boasts fun and competition, a chance to “meet, greet and compete.”

“There aren’t a lot of alternatives to the bar scene for networking, and people don’t always want to get on a treadmill at a gym to exercise,” says Lavonzell Nicholson, owner and CEO of PlayNOLA. “This is a good way to stay active and busy, to burn calories and get the heart pumping while having a good time.”

Tod Everage, a young attorney, serves as team captain of Daj Mahal, a team comprised of other attorneys mixed with employees of Audubon Zoo. Team names are usually tongue-in-cheek, he admits, as he leads his squad into competition against the likes of NOLA All-

Stars, Double D’s, Free Ballin’, and Ballz Krewe. For Everage and his teammates, the PlayNOLA league is as much about exercise and camaraderie as it is competition.

“Dodgeball is a very aerobic exercise,” Everage says. “You have to be on your toes at all times because the game is fast-paced and always moving.”

Although the ultimate prize is nothing more than bragging rights, Everage confesses sometimes the PlayNOLA competitions get heated. Arguments break out about whether or not someone is hit, and occasionally disputes are settled by one of three decidedly “unofficial” referees in black T-shirts who patrol the gym floor between fields of play. Mostly, though, players show good sportsmanship and need no officials. At all levels, in fact, dodgeball is a largely self-officiated sport governed by the honor system.

Nicholson credits the “co-ed component” of the games as a way of toning down over-aggressive or hostile play. After all, each team is required by the rules to start at least two female players, she says. This also makes it one of the most popular sports offered by PlayNOLA. Although the group first began hosting dodgeball competitions in January, within the first week more than 10 teams had formed, each team containing a minimum of 8 players. Nicholson credits players’ familiarity with the sport for its popularity.

“This is a chance for adults to live out our nostalgia,” Nicholson says. “We all remember playing dodgeball in school.”

The object of dodgeball, of course, is simple: using six foam balls and six active players at a time on each team, one team wins by eliminating all opposing players by getting them



photo courtesy of Lavonzell Nicholson

“out.” According to official rules published by the National Amateur Dodgeball Association, this is accomplished by hitting an opposing player with a live thrown ball below the shoulders, or by catching a ball thrown by an opponent before it touches the ground. Games usually impose a three-minute limit, and after time expires the team with the most active players wins. To prevent stalling, a more recent addition to the rulebook involves a “5-second violation.” Similar to a shot-clock in basketball, this rule makes it illegal for a team to control all six balls on their side of the court for more than 5 seconds.

The pure simplicity of its rules makes dodgeball a common extra-curricular sport for all age groups. Building on a growing popularity among older students, Tulane University and the University of New Orleans, among others, offer it as part of their intramural sports programs, and area high schools have followed suit.

“It’s always our most popular activity with the most participants,” says Jimmy Gatti, intramural sports director at Brother Martin High School. “With six players per team, one year we had over thirty teams.”

According to Gatti, high school players pay more attention to strategy than younger players, and the teams who implement good plans of attack win more regularly.

“I’ve seen all kinds of strategies, and some of these kids come up with some pretty ingenious ones,” Gatti says. “One of the more popular is the lob-and-strike.”

The “lob-and-strike” strategy is a simple set-up maneuver in which one player on a team tosses a ball up in the air to bait an opposing player into catching it just as a fellow player hits the baited opponent with a fastball. Another popular tactic among older players is the “kamikaze.” For this, a player sacrifices himself by running up and jumping from behind the center line, flying nearer to the opposing player and striking at him at close range before being disqualified for landing in the opposing team’s area.

“The guys who use the kamikaze strategy like it because you’re sacrificing yourself to eliminate a strong opposing player,” Gatti said. “The kids love that one.”

A less athletic strategy is a trick called the “raisin.” To accomplish this, a player squashes the foam of the ball so tightly that air within



photo courtesy of Lavonzell Nicholson

the foam disperses, and the opposing player is left trying to catch or dodge a temporarily flat, deflated ball that resembles a dried grape, sometimes creating a “knuckleball” effect.

Just as the same basic rules apply from grade schools to adult leagues, so does the significance of victory remain constant. With adulthood comes faster throws and more serious competition. More organized teams practice strategy and even travel out of state to compete in national events. A few years ago, a group of grown men from the metro area formed a team called New Orleans Love Venom and traveled just outside Asheville, North Carolina to place second at the Dodgeball World Cup, an all-male event hosted each January by Black Mountain Recreation & Parks.

Officials of the Dodgeball World Cup event associate the sport’s resurgence among young adults with the 2004 comedy film *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, which practically trademarked the “kamikaze” strategy. Starring Vince Vaughn and Ben Stiller, the film also famously established “the five D’s of dodgeball: ‘dodge,’ ‘duck,’ ‘dip,’ ‘dive,’ and . . . ‘dodge.’”

“We started this competition as a direct result of the movie,” says Casey Conner, Black Mountain’s recreation superintendent. “The film was a great advertisement for our competition.”

At this level of play, Conner says, players throw the ball up to 70 miles per hour. In fact, side competitions at the event include the “Hardest Thrower” honor for the fastest

throw and an individual MVP prize called the “Dodgeball World Champion” award commemorated by a pro-wrestling style victory belt.

With high velocities and aggressive play in all-male competition, some are naturally concerned about safety. However, those involved with the sport find nothing dangerous with dodgeball outside the typical injuries common to other low-contact sports.

“We use a standard foam ball covered in rubber, which doesn’t hurt or leave a bruise,” Conner says. “Because there’s no physical contact at all between players, there’s actually less animosity among competitors than you find in other sports.”

Many school P.E. classes and intramural programs take additional precautions. Brother Martin’s intramural dodgeball teams, for example, play on padded mats in sock feet.

“Dodgeball is a sport, and like any sport, players are susceptible to twisted ankles and other minor injuries, but otherwise it’s not dangerous at all,” Gatti says.

So, whether you’re looking for a social or competitive outlet, aerobic exercise, a means for reliving youth, or simply revenge against the jocks who tormented you in the middle school gym, dodgeball offers a little something for everyone. The sport can be played in the context of informal pick-up games at family picnics, serious national competitions and all places in between.