

Yo-yo champion of Arroyo Seco playground

By CRAIG CHASTAIN
SPECIAL TO THE HERMISTON HERALD

There were not a lot of entertainment options for 11-year-old boys in 1957.

Sure, we were living in Los Angeles (Highland Park, actually) home of Disney, big dreams and Stage 3 smog alerts, but there was not much day-to-day excitement coming from the world's entertainment capital. The music charts were dominated by snoozers like Pat Boone, Paul Anka and Andy Williams. Our black and white TV offered such compelling fare as "Father Knows Best" and "The Real McCoys." Elvis and "American Bandstand" still were down the road, and the Dodgers were playing in Brooklyn.

With so much idle time and so few diversions, it is small wonder that I and a small cadre of friends chose a seldom-traveled path littered with potential heartbreak, frustration and disappointment.

For us, it was the yo-yo. The yo-yo of 1957 bore little resemblance to the gyro-fantastic models of today. It was just two pieces of rounded wood connected to three feet of string, but in the hands of a gifted showman, the results could be spectacular. One Sunday night I watched the "Ed Sullivan Show" with my family as a world-renowned "yo-yo-ist" (which I am still not sure is a word) stunned the audience with a jaw-dropping display of whirling wood and sizzling string.

As an athletically challenged, nearsighted geek I thought — "I can do that."

Monday at school I shared my dream with three close friends — Larry Lehigh, Tom Byerly and Danny Hall. Driven by equal parts curiosity and boredom, the freshly formed quartet immediately traveled to Tanner's Toy Town where we purchased four yo-yos in four different colors. (Full disclosure: Tom picked up the tab since he had a paper route and our solemn promises to pay him back.)

The singular hangout in those days was the Arroyo Seco Playground, where young guys from the neighborhood came to partake of such tempting diversions as ping pong, checkers and tetherball. As our shared addiction snowballed for all things yo-yo, the four of us soon focused on little else. Eventually, we took to huddling together behind the handball courts to avoid the stares and scorn of our peers. We became known around the playground as "the yo-yucks."

Sadly, there were few outlets to express our chosen passion, but all that changed one Saturday when a representative of the Duncan Yo-Yo Company came to the playground. Duncan was, at the time, the world leader in the "sport," and the company had chosen the Los Angeles parks and recreation system as the launching pad for what it hoped would be a national competition to find the best young yo-yo-ists in the country.

To that end, there would be competitions at local playgrounds with appealing prizes like a trophy, yo-yos and \$10 in cash. The playground winners would move on to a city-wide event and a potential shot at a national title.

As we listened for all the details, each of us was thinking the same thing: "I am going to win this, even if I have to crush my three best friends in the process." It was a day that would mark the beginning of the end for "the four yo-yucks."

With just three weeks to prepare, each of us dived into our own unique training regimen. Larry, the mama's boy, bulked up on a steady diet of encouragement and sugar cookies from Mrs. Lehigh. Tom, the recluse, went to his room where no one quite knew if he was practicing or just taking a lot of "naps." Danny, the juvenile delinquent, temporarily quit bullying fourth graders and threw all his anger and daddy issues into the task.

For myself, I uncharacteristically made a commitment to triumph — a decision, I believe, that has helped to shape me as a grown-up. Over the next 21 days, I became one with my yo-yo, practicing tricks again and again in front of my mirror with a newfound flair I had stolen from the guy on the "Ed Sullivan Show."

The day of the event arrived and the early rounds went pretty much as expected. There were about 20 entrants, but everyone knew it was going to come to a smack-down involving the "four yo-yucks." Sure enough, after an hour of eliminations, it had become a Four-Friend Face-Off.

Larry faltered first, due perhaps to the seven-plus pounds he had packed on during training. His attempt at "Walking the Dog" ran away from him and he was too slow to respond. And then there were three.

Tom reinforced our thinking that he had napped through his training. His version of "the sleeper" — pretty much a "Yo-Yo 101" trick — went to sleep at the bottom of the string and Tom was powerless to wake it up. It was down to Danny and me.

Squaring off with yo-yo in hand, it was not lost on me that, if I beat Danny, there was a real possibility that he would fall back on old habits and beat me up every day until school started. Making a key life decision, I pushed the fear aside and focused on the prize.

What happened next became the stuff of playground patter for the rest of the summer. Danny and I matched trick for trick, from compulsories like the "creeper" and "rock the cradle" to the challenges of the "breakaway" and "around the world." Finally, I stuck a flawless execution of "the Eiffel Tower" and Danny muffed it, string and yo-yo draping him ingloriously in defeat and despair.

And just like that, I was the "1957 Duncan Yo-Yo Champion of Arroyo Seco Playground."

Regretfully, the four yo-yucks were never friends in the same way again. I claimed my trophy in front of them, but it did not feel as good as I thought it would. I went on to the city championships and was eliminated in the first round, ironically by a bungled "Eiffel Tower." And Danny never beat me up — he just did not speak to me again until high school.

I used the \$10 to pay back Tom.

And I still have the trophy.

ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers are bombarded and overwhelmed with facts. What we long for, though, is meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level.

And that's why the Hermiston Herald will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Pendleton or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

Tom Hallman Jr., tbhbook@aol.com

Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Oregonian newspaper. He previously was a reporter at the Hermiston Herald.



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