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Sports

April 9, 2008

WhirlyBall: Best Sports Hybrid Since Basketball

By Aril Grain
Staff Writer

What do you get when you cross basketball, jai alai and polo, then throw in some bumper cars for good measure? The most awesome sport ever, that's what.

It's okay if you've never heard of WhirlyBall before; I hadn't either until I played it, but now I am most certainly hooked. Although I admit it is a little challenging to describe WhirlyBall to someone who has never had the pleasure of experiencing it, I will do my level best.

Located on Route 5 in South Windsor and called "The World's Only Totally Mechanized Team Sport," the rules of WhirlyBall are relatively simple: there are two teams of five people, each equipped with a bumper car-like vehicle called a "Whirly Bug" and a plastic scoop racquet. On either side of the 4,000-square foot court are hung two backboards with circular Plexiglas targets. The goal is to launch a softball-sized whiffle ball at the target with your scoop in order to score points for your team. Hitting the target is worth two points and will set off a buzzer to alert players of a score. A referee looks down on the game from a booth above the court, keeping score and watching for penalties, such as hitting the opposing team with your racquet or ramming an opponent head-on with your Whirly Bug.

Whereas the rules may be simple, what's not so easy is figuring out how to drive the Whirly Bugs. Powered by alternating metal strips on the floor, the Bugs are actually nothing like a conventional bumper car. Instead of a steering wheel, the driver maneuvers their Bug with a crank handle that allows for a sharper turning radius and driving in reverse, and it frees up a hand for using the scoop to pick up, pass and shoot the ball.

As a first-timer, there were several instances throughout the fifteen-minute game intervals in which I found myself unable to move my vehicle. Thankfully, the nine other people I was with had never played before either, so we all ran into the same problem and Whirly Bug pile-ups were frequent.

It was also challenging to properly deal with the racquet. It was easy to chase after the ball and scoop it up, but numerous times after capturing the ball, I'd turn around only to be cornered by a fleet of Whirly Bugs and unable to make it back to my team's goal. At this point, I would try to pass the ball to a teammate and only succeed in slamming the ball into the ceiling. The few times that I had an open shot at the goal, I found it hard to remember what I was told at the beginning of the game: the shot is all in the wrist, and I would miss the backboard completely.

After our hour was up—the court is rented out in 60 minute blocks—and after I had assessed the few bruises I had sustained from being boxed around by the other Whirly Bugs, I was curious what genius had come up with such a fantastic game.

Tools

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As it turns out, in 1962, Stan Mangum, a Salt Lake City automotive shop owner, came up with the idea after he had watched his son play a kind of hockey with a tin can and a golf cart. Mangum's realization was that although similar sports had been played on horseback, on skates and on foot, never had such a game been played while riding a machine. He then began work on the unique design of the Whirly Bugs.

The first WhirlyBall court was opened in Detroit, Mich. in 1980. As of 2006, there were 34 courts in the United States and Canada, although the South Windsor location is the only one in New England.

After we got our WhirlyBall history lesson, our group hung out in the parking lot for a moment, in awe of our experience and planning our next tournament. I wasn't the only one who was hooked.

Rental times are available by reservation only, preferably a week in advance, and require a minimum of ten players. The fee for one hour is \$180.20, tax included, Sunday through Thursday and \$201.40 Friday and Saturday. Tipping your referee is expected.

Also, did I mention they serve beer? I told you this game is awesome.

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