



# sports

## THE GREAT CHAGRIN FALLS DUNG BALL CHAMPIONSHIPS

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The joy of sports seems inherent in childhood. It requires no more than the innate urge to run around, the natural impulse to throw and kick and, especially for boys, some sort of balls or projectiles to focus the activity. For kids growing up on E55 and Fleet Street in Cleveland, this joy found expression in the Great Chagrin Falls Dung Ball Championships. To echo Dave Barry, I AM NOT MAKING THIS UP...

My father and his buddies at the Serbo-Croatian Hall had bought a dilapidated 25 acre farm about 30 miles from town, which they together repaired, painted, plumbed, wired and fenced. Their plan was to board the horses of the well-heeled and use the profit to keep a few steeds of their own.

The cost of hay and straw for a winter would have broken the whole deal, so we grew 15 acres of alfalfa. When alfalfa ripens, it sours quickly, so in July we had about ten days to cut, dry, bale and stash the crop. Our fathers conscripted us for the job (free labor, it seemed, was the whole point of having children), and we would set out on two old tractors, towing a baling machine and a hay wagon and a shared determination to make the best of those long days. The place wasn't far from Chagrin Falls. It would prove a fitting name for the game we invented.

The playing field formed naturally in a three-sectioned compound wired with sufficient voltage to keep the amorous stallions away from any unwilling mare. One paddock in particular housed a large pile of horse plops (named for the sound they made when they hit the ground) and cow pies (named for their shape) for spreading on the fields after the hay was in. Both of these deposits would serve a useful function in the Great Chagrin Falls Dung Ball Championship.

We adapted the rules from dodge ball. Two teams would form, shaped by the affections, animosities and judgments of the week as well as long standing alliances and grudges. Kinship loomed large: Gary and Dale Planicka with their cousin Andy Paluf; Oleh and Omelan Korenewycz and their deranged sister Slawka (a waifish sociopath feared by all); Matthew, Mark, Luke and Bela Hriczo, but four of the 12 offspring from an odd marriage between a Mormon and a Hungarian Catholic undertaker; the twins, Terry and Jerry Wolanski. Loners like me, Dale Dranchak and Al Zahuronak (later to play music with Joe Walsh) did our best to seem appealing to the pre-formed core groups.

The object was to drive the other team to ruin and surrender through inflicting a combination of insult and injury from behind the center line. No one could wear gloves or leave the paddock. The right choice of projectiles was essential to success. A pie or a plop too recently deposited would melt into the attacker's hand, with nothing left to hurl, an insulting kind of "own goal." Too dry, and the object would throw well and could inflict injury but had nothing degrading to add upon impact. Ideal was the perfectly cured item: a shell hard enough to throw without risk but also thin enough to shatter on impact, leaving its rich interior all over the stricken enemy. Such a find was a rare treasure, usually hoarded for just the

right moment.

A good cow pie offered many of the advantages of an off-center Frisbee (then called a Pluto Platter): it could be spun through the air sidearm with great angular momentum, smattering everyone below its long, unpredictable flight path. Thrown up at a steep angle, it could boomerang. Saucer-like shear tendencies often released the moist interior before actual impact. Enlightened self interest eventually produced one inviolable rule: the person choosing such a weapon had to shout "Cow pie!" before each launch. More popular and predictable were the baseball-sized horse plops.

And so -- armed, motivated and loosely organized -- we would engage in battle, seeking to force our opponents from the field. A high lob of a very large cow pie would force the other team to look upward in hopes of avoiding its descent, thus making them vulnerable to massed fire from the horse plop throwers. Feigning serious injury could have the same result, momentarily freezing targets on the duped team for directed horse plop fire. An unconvinced enemy, however, would punish the flopper without mercy. A team truly desperate could often release one or more of the stallions onto the field, hoping to exploit the chaos to their own end and decimate their opponents, but this, too, could backfire: sometimes all had no choice but to flee the field of play and accept a draw.

But most players and all spectators wanted the game to end conventionally. Sooner or later attrition would take a greater toll on one team than the other. Players would stop from exhaustion, injury or in sudden disgust with the entire process. As soon as the active duty roster reached one, the endgame ensued. The leading team could then cross the center line and close in for the kill. From this close range, the remaining few would drive their sole opponent backwards with dung barrages of all densities and shapes, hoping to force him into contact with the fence and, in particular, with the bovine voltage electrical wire.

Imagine a charge designed to deter a beast of 1200 to 1500 pounds released upon a kid less than a tenth that size. The shock was an assault upon body and mind that would send the player dazed into the air and finally crash him to the ground, there to become ground zero for a jubilant victory dance by the winning team.

Crazy Slawka brought her own variant to this endgame. Determined to keep her destiny in her own hands and shrieking like a banshee, she would grab one very rich dung ball in each hand, hold both aloft and back herself so quickly into the fence that her assailants had no time to flee before her launch -- a glassy-eyed, grimacing human projectile with two very powerful warheads frozen in her grip by the tremendous electrical forces coursing through her body. She often succeeded in blasting her tormentors with warheads and electrical charge in her final, diabolical gesture of contempt. A testament to the deeper reaches of the human spirit.

Such is the true story of the Great Chagrin Falls Dung Ball Championships. Sport is in us all. But, as Dave Barry would also say: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME. ■

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Thursday, Feb. 26

TN vs. PEACE @ 3:30 p.m.

### Saturday, Feb. 28

SB @ Sweet Briar, 12:30 p.m.  
and 2:30 p.m.

### Sunday, Mar. 1

TN vs. York @ Hilton Head Spring  
Break, 12 p.m.

### Monday, Mar. 2

TN vs. Bloomburg @ Hilton Head  
Spring Break, 8 a.m.

### Tuesday, Mar. 3

TN vs. Vincent @ Hilton Head Spring  
Break, 9 a.m.

SB @ Randolph, 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.

TN vs. Wartburg @ Hilton Head Spring  
Break, 6 p.m.

