

More than fun and games: At Comedy Sportz, it's competition

By Kim Costello
Arts and Features Editor

The team is down by five points, but they have one last chance to score. All they have to do, using only mime and gibberish, is get their teammate to guess what they are acting out: Hang gliding with Jimmy Hoffa off a piece of bacon. Can they do it? Who knows, but it can be a lot of fun to watch.

It's called Comedy Sportz, a Raleigh club in which teams of "actletes" compete in improvisational games to see who's the best at thinking on their feet. There are 15 such clubs across the country, and one will be opening Aug. 20 at the Omni Europa Hotel in Chapel Hill.

Unlike stand-up comedy places, the audience at Comedy Sportz plays an integral part in the show, yelling out suggestions that the team players must use in their scenes.

"We're different than other comedy clubs," said Tom Caruso, who manages the club and has done stand-up comedy in the Raleigh area.

He said that the audience participation contributed greatly to the atmosphere of the club. "The audience just doesn't come in here and sit and say, 'OK, make me laugh.' The audience gets involved, yelling out suggestions, and to them, it makes them feel like they're a part of the show."

Another unique aspect of Comedy Sportz is that all the humor is clean, so everyone can feel comfortable at the show, Caruso said. "To quote Groucho Marx: ... 'If you say something that's dirty, it's not necessarily funny. In or-

der to be clean, it takes a lot more creativity and a lot more thought.'"

Some patrons have found out the hard way that the club is serious about maintaining this standard. If someone in the audience yells out something that the referee deems obscene, a "brown bag" foul is called, and the person must wear a paper bag over his head for the rest of the scene.

But the fouls are not handed out just to audience members. Actletes must beware of "wimping," "waffling" and "groaner" fouls, all of which are penalties for bad scenes or jokes.

The group started out four years ago playing for a small crowd of just two or three people in a local restaurant and grew into a full-fledged club, which on an average night is filled to its capacity of more than 100 people.

"We've got 25 people now that are a part of our troupe, and on any given night you'll see nine of those people," Caruso said.

The actletes have diverse daytime occupations—some are computer jockeys, one is a biochemist and some are still in school. Many had little or no experience performing in front of a crowd before they joined the Comedy Sportz team.

"You don't have to do stage work to actually do this," said Matt Cunningham, an actlete who has performed in 10 shows. "My favorite thing about (improv) is that pretty much anybody can do it, it's just how long it's going to take you to do it. You have to be spontaneous."

The team members agree that going

up on stage is an experience unlike any other.

"When you come up (on stage) as a player, you have no idea of what's going to happen in the course of a show," Caruso said. "From that standpoint, it's exciting being a player because you're kind of psyched up and pumped."

"You don't know what's going to happen next. You're always on the edge."

Deborah Stencil, who has been a member of the troupe for two years, said she became hooked on improv at the age of 17 when she saw a show at the original Comedy Sportz in Milwaukee.

"I volunteered from the audience, and, at the time, I thought, I have to do this someday," Stencil said. "After I did my first show, I remember thinking, 'I am the happiest girl alive.'"

Wray Templeton, an actlete and a 1987 UNC graduate, said it can take a while for the audience to become familiar with improvisational comedy.

"We get a lot of repeat offenders—they think it's stand-up," he explained. "They'll come back two weeks later and yell the same suggestion, thinking we'll do the same exact jokes. But by the nature of (improv), we don't."

The actletes say that people often come to the show armed with suggestions they think are original but in actuality are heard at every show. For this reason, the club recently posted a list of

words that are "forbidden," including Jell-O, skydiving, Marilyn Monroe, SPAM and bungee jumping.

"Bungee jumping we get all the time, but if it's made a little more clever, we'll use it," Mookie Harris said. He admitted that one of the craziest suggestions he ever had to act out did involve bungee jumping—off Tom Brokaw's forehead.

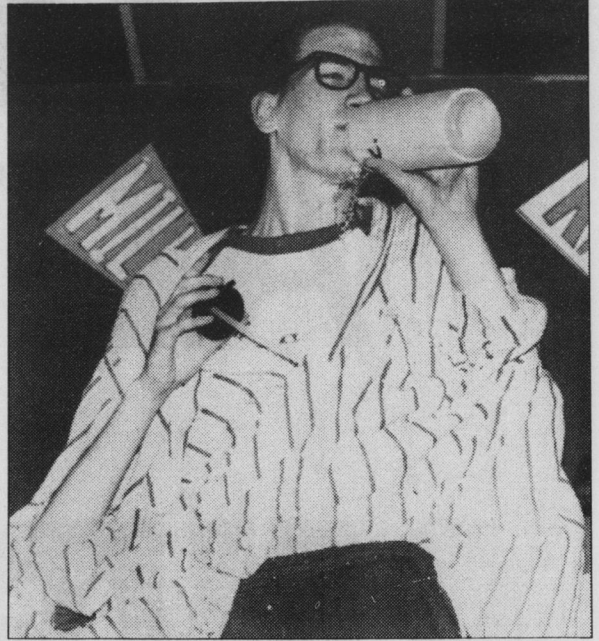
Actlete David Gregory added, "We tend not to remember the really crazy suggestions because they're so annoying."

Comedy Sportz already is holding training workshops in Chapel Hill and is looking for actletes for its new club, said Templeton, who is running the program. The classes are open to anyone interested in improv and each generally has about 10 to 15 trainees.

"We practice some exercises and work on the skills, then you start working on the games," Templeton said. "Once you have the games, you pretty much know how to handle yourself on stage, and we see if you can actually get up there and do it."

"But there's really no way to prepare for being up there in front of a live audience."

Stencil said having other players on stage was reassuring. "The group of us, we're just like a team, and we work together and help each other, and that's why this is better than stand-up."



Matt Cunningham gets some help from the arms of his teammate at Comedy Sportz

Council

number of votes will serve the remaining two years of Powell's term.

Werner announced in the spring that he did not plan to seek re-election.

Rimer said that, at this point, he did not know whether he would run. He added that he planned to make his announcement early in the filing period, after the council had made its decision

on a 1993-94 budget.

Town-gown relations, the search for a landfill and waste reduction probably will be issues in the coming election, Rimer said.

Rimer praised UNC Chancellor Paul Hardin for doing a marvelous job bridging the gap between the University and the town. "It takes two to paddle the canoe."

By Zoe Trohanis
Staff Writer

Merchandise bearing the label of Phillies Blunt is all the rage with American teenagers this summer. But the only problem is that the people wearing the logo usually don't know what it is that they're advertising.

The Phillies Blunt label refers to a brand of inexpensive cigars which is sometimes hollowed out and filled with marijuana, said Gary Boston, co-owner of Rock Art in Chapel Hill.

"A lot (of people) see it and recognize it, and since they are influenced by pop culture and the popularity of the merchandise, they buy it," he said.

Boston added that many people had no idea what Phillies Blunt meant and that they frequently asked about it at the

register before they bought the product.

"We sell dozens and dozens of Phillies Blunt items," said Greg Boston, also co-owner of Rock Art. "In fact, it's one of our best-selling items right now."

However, the people who wear the Phillies Blunt logo are not necessarily the ones smoking marijuana, many pot smokers say.

"I would say that a person wearing a shirt with the legalization symbol or NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) logo on it would be more likely to have knowledge of the plant," said "Sierra," a UNC senior who did not wish to be identified and who described herself as a longtime pot smoker.

She said she had never heard of the Phillies Blunt merchandise or what the hollowed-out cigars sometimes were used for.

"Pete," a UNC sophomore, agreed that his friends who used marijuana and were familiar with the label did not wear it.

"Most of the people that you see wearing it don't smoke (pot), because if you do smoke, it's just asking for trouble," he said. "It's pretty stupid to advertise that you smoke pot."

"You can get in enough trouble around here wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt."

Despite the rising popularity of products associated with the green leaf, the trend contradicts recent studies that say marijuana use among teenagers and college students has been declining since 1986.

The New York-based company Not From Concentrate bought the license to sell Phillies Blunt merchandise in 1992.

The co-owner of the company, who calls himself Stash, said that rap stars helped start the Phillies Blunt mania.

"The hip-hop movement has really become more and more popular, with the Blunts being just one of the elements that has jumped to the forefront," Stash said.

He added that Not From Concentrate had not needed to advertise its product much since most of the publicity came from rap stars, such as Dr. Dre and House of Pain, and others who wear the Phillies Blunt logo.

The cigar company that produces Phillies Blunt, Hav-a-Tampa, also has seen some net growth, said Tony Barone, a company vice president.

"We've had 12 years of positive growth in an industry that's declining," Barone said.

Hav-a-Tampa receives a 5-percent royalty fee from Phillies Blunt merchandise sales that Not From Concentrate generates, Barone said.

He estimated that his company had

earned about \$12,000 since the licensed products were put on the market last year.

All of the money received from sales of the Phillies Blunt label is donated to various local and national charities in order to avoid the association with the illegal substance.

"The reason we licensed our logo wasn't to make a lot of money but rather to protect it from being defaced or slandered," he said.

Like any popular fashion item, bootleg Phillies Blunt products already are flooding the market.

Both Stash and Barone said that fake Phillies Blunt shirts and caps probably were more readily available than the original licensed products. Barone believes that over 300,000 unlicensed items have been sold in New York City alone.

Barone said the company did not manufacture Phillies Blunt with the intent to sell it for illegal uses.

"Our company has been making cigars since 1958," he said. "We survived the '60s. Why now, I don't know. We're not proponents of marijuana use."

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PHE

adult-use business because it does not have walk-in customers.

OCAP members still are confident that PHE's appeal will be denied.

"I think our counsel will have an excellent argument, so we're optimistic," said Dave Smith, OCAP president and pastor of Abundant Life Church.

While OCAP has not decided what it will do if PHE is granted a permit to build in July, Herman said PHE owner Phil Harvey has not determined what the company will do if it is denied the permit.

Herman said, "I don't assume anything until it happens."

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