

Going for the JUGGLER

By Jennifer Speer Ramundi
special writer

It's no longer performed just by clowns at the circus. The newest craze turns out to be nothing more than an old skill that has been revived — juggling.

It's a hobby that's relatively easy to learn, is good aerobic exercise, involves minimal expense and increases the ability to concentrate. Although no one is exactly sure what prompted this new interest, most agree that an increase in organized clubs and workshops has made a difference.

Juggler Brett Dunn, 21, of Livonia attributes some of the increase in juggling's popularity to television exposure. At least that's what got him started.

About five years ago he saw a juggling act on "Saturday Night Live" and decided to give it a try.

"Every spare second I have I juggle," said Dunn, a student at Lawrence Institute of Technology in Southfield. "In the summer I get real good because I can juggle three hours a day. In the winter, I juggle once a week."

He's a member of the Redford Unicycle Club, whose members also juggle.

DUNN ALSO PERFORMS in clubs, shows and on the street. His performance partner, Ken Krakut, also became interested in juggling through television. Krakut saw Philippe Petit perform on an "ABC Wide World of Sports" show about 11 years ago and was hooked.

"I saw him do a three-ball cascade," said Krakut, also a Redford unicyclist. "I dropped a few at first, but I taught myself. There weren't any juggling clubs then, so there wasn't any other way."

Locally, the Redford Unicycle Club and the Troy Juggling Club meet weekly. The Redford Juggling Club will resume activity this spring. The Jugglers of Ann Arbor and a University of Michigan club are also looking for members.

Each of the local clubs is a loosely organized group of about 30 jugglers with 10 to 15 gathering for each meeting. Jim Oakley of the Troy club describes the meetings as a time to practice, to socialize, and to share ideas and skills. Not all those participating in the club are at the same level, so they help each other.

Technology has been a boost to juggling as a hobby because it has made it possible for juggling props, such as clubs — which resemble howling pins — to be mass produced. They are now cheaper, lighter, better made, and can be found at many area magic stores.

That wasn't always the case. Krakut of Dearborn Heights recalls that his first set of clubs were made out of plywood.

JIM OAKLEY OF Troy said the new clubs are perfectly balanced and shaped and are available at prices people can afford.

A set of well-made, used plastic clubs might run \$4.50 each, according to Paul Kyprie of the Jugglers of Ann Arbor, while an early handmade club might run as much as \$75 at today's prices.

Oakley, or Jim the Juggler as he is also known, also enjoys performance juggling. His trademark is juggling three plastic chickens. He said it took him about a week to teach himself the skill — a week when he was home from school with strep throat.

Although Oakley juggles as part of a comedy routine, he said many people do it for meditation, exercise, or just for the fun of it.

Dunn believes the concentration skills that he needs to juggle have spilled over into other areas of his life. He credits juggling with improving his ability to concentrate in school. He said that after he learned to juggle, his high school grades improved from a B average to an A.

MORE THAN 100 people attended the 1987 Mid-Winter Juggle-In, sponsored by the Jugglers of Ann Arbor, held last month in Ypsilanti.

The third annual event had its largest turnout and included



Brett Dunn of Livonia, a member of the Redford Unicycle Club, keeps things moving during the recent Mid-Winter Juggle-In in Ypsilanti.

four hours of instructional workshops, juggling videos and ample space to practice. There also was a unicycle workshop. This same group hosts a summer festival every year, with the seventh annual summer fest being organized right now.

"This is the perfect time, the end of winter," said festival organizer Paul Kyprie of Ann Arbor. "Everybody is itching to get outside, to get a big dose, a fix of juggling."

The purpose of the festival is much the same as the purpose of the International Jugglers' Association (IJA) — to render assistance to jugglers.

Kyprie emphasizes that all types of people enjoy juggling. The festival included a 77-year-old man as well as several children.

"The majority of the growth has been as a hobby," Kyprie said. "There's not a lot of serious jugglers out there — those who can do five-, six-, seven-object juggling — but there are a lot of jugglers who do it because they love it."

He believes one of the reasons juggling has taken off as a popular hobby is because of the IJA and its support. The IJA publishes a quarterly magazine, which assists jugglers in locating other jugglers and juggling clubs in their area.

The magazine also includes information on new juggling tricks, festivals scheduled, books about juggling, and an update on equipment and props that are available.

Kyprie said the biggest growth in juggling has come on the West Coast but predicts that in four or five years juggling will be so popular in this area, he may have to restrict attendance at the juggling festivals.

Today he has more than 500 people on his continually growing mailing list. And he said the IJA has grown from 500 members 10 years ago to approximately 2,000 today.

He predicts that 500 to possibly 800 people will participate in the IJA's weeklong international festival in Akron, Ohio, this summer. Ten years ago, 50 people, mostly professional jugglers, attended the annual convention.



Lisa Biller of the Troy Juggling Club has some devilish fun twirling some juggler's paraphernalia called devil sticks.

Beginner tries hand at juggling

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Juggling is not a difficult skill to learn, or so I was told. "It's desire more so than coordination," said Jim (the Juggler) Oakley of Troy. "You need desire, then patience, then coordination, in that order, to learn to juggle. It's not that hard to do."

With those words ringing in my ears, I packed up my desire, my patience, and my little-used coordination and went off to a workshop for beginning jugglers. The workshop was part of the 1987 Mid-Winter Juggle-In held in Ypsilanti and organized by the Jugglers of Ann Arbor.

BRETT DUNN of Livonia, an accomplished juggler, was tapped to lead the beginners workshop, and I'm sure he was surprised to find a real beginner in the class, one who'd never once tried to juggle — me.

The next surprise was on me. I was handed three scarves and was told that it was the first step in learning how to juggle. Yes, scarves, of the same type that are often tied gracefully around the neckline of a blouse.

The purpose of using scarves is to get the feel of the pattern of juggling. Once I started, I could see why it is done. You start with your hands facing downward and toss the scarves, one at a time, of course, into the air in a crossing pattern in front of your face. Scarves don't drop quickly to the ground, they float, giving you a chance to grab them.

Once you have the feel of it, it's time to pick up a bean-bag ball. This is the best type of ball for juggling because it doesn't bounce off your hands or roll 20 feet when you drop it.

YOU START with one ball and toss it from one hand to the other, in an arc about as high as your forehead, right in front of your face.

It sounds simple, and it is, if that's all you plan to do. But it's an important step because you need to get an idea how to properly toss a bean-bag ball — how high to throw it, how much effort it takes.

The third step is to grasp a second juggling ball and begin tossing both of them in a crossing pattern, each in an arc in front of your face.

Where to learn

If you want to juggle juggling into your lifestyle, here are some people you can contact:

- Dave Brickford, Redford Unicycle Club, 533-4677.
- Ken Krakut, Redford Juggling Club, 278-3885.
- Jim Oakley, Troy Juggling Club, 641-7523.
- Persons interested in forming a club of their own may call Paul Kyprie in Ann Arbor at 934-0368.



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