

Irish Road Bowling - American Style

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When I was in elementary school, in Mattydale, New York in the 1950s, we walked to school in the morning and back again in the afternoon. In addition, there was another round trip at mid day for those of us who went home for lunch. The kids in our family always made the mid day trek come good weather or bad, since we lived only 2-1/2 blocks down Kirsch Drive from St. Margaret's Catholic School. It wasn't a long walk, but when the weather didn't help make it interesting, the walk was very repetitive and boring.

It always seemed to be more prevalent in the springtime that most of the boys would come to school toting their bags of marbles. The marbles that made the trip to school were always very carefully selected. Everyone wanted to show off their best marbles but at the same time there was the ever present risk that Sister Mary WhateverHerNameWas would spot you with them in class. Then she would confiscate them and add them to her vast and growing collection. One could try to carry them in your pockets and forgo the leather pouch but we all remembered how badly that choice had turned out in the past. Marbles streaming from the pocket of some poor unfortunate wretch would send him to the floor on his hands and knees to gather up his treasure before the nun arrived on the scene. But arrive she would, with that silent disapproving stare and the outreached open hand, waiting for the marbles to be placed there. The room was silent then, except for the tapping cadence of the shoe of an impatient nun. Experience had shown that it was best to pack just a few marbles in a small cloth pouch that could be hidden in a pocket and allow you to skim under the nun's radar.

This was during the time when the cat's eye marbles were beginning to flood the market. The newer marbles had an air of being mass-produced and lacked the uniqueness and personality of the older marbles. I liked the older marbles better because they had more unique color patterns. I kept these older marbles in reserve while I played the cat's

eye marbles. If I had lost one of them, I didn't care since they were a commodity that was easily replaced.

On the playground marbles was usually played within a ring created by dragging one's heel in the dirt while walking backwards in a circular fashion until the structure was completed. That was the standard method for playing marbles, but you couldn't stop and do that on the way to and from school. There was a variation of the standard game of marbles that we played on the street. I don't remember how it started but we probably picked it up from the older boys on the block. Any number could play and the game commenced with the first player pitching his marble along the side of the road in the direction that we were walking at the time. Each successive player would attempt to hit one of the other players' marbles when his turn came. Players would get to keep any marble so struck and the losing player would have to start another marble. On rainy days the puddles would slow down the play but we would not be deterred by inclement weather. It was our belief that if we could walk to school in it we could play marbles in it. Sometimes the game would bog down in a heated debate concerning the interpretation of some rule of the game and we would have to stop the game early and run the rest of the way to school to get there before the bell rang.

Occasionally a new kid would join the group and this would give Jerry a chance to play his favorite trick. After quickly shouting "Switchies" followed by "Bombsies" the unsuspecting new comer would find Jerry hovering over his poor little marble taking aim at it with a 12 pound iron ball. Now "Bombsies" was usually a gamble. You got to move up to your opponent's marble and drop your marble from directly overhead. But if you missed – there your marble was – lying only inches away from an opponent's marble with no means of defense. And nobody missed a shot from that range. However, in this instance Jerry's over grown "steely" reduced that gamble. It was really a high school shot used at Track & Field meets in the Shot Put event. Those who knew him had long ago banned Jerry from using it in our regular games. Released over hard ground from a height of about three feet it would smash any ordinary marble into unrecognizable pieces. Over soft ground it merely buried the poor little sphere. After crushing the new kid's marble

Jerry would adopt an air of fake generosity and say, “You can keep it,” referring to the crushed pile of glass that was formerly a marble. Jerry never really wanted the marble itself, he just wanted to see the look on the kid’s face as he watched his marble turn to dust.

In my garage today is an old metal flour canister painted white with patterns of red and silver circles on it. Remnants of movers’ tape still stick to that old canister as a silent reminder of all the traveling that it has done. It was once part of an old canister set that I got when my mother bought a new set. These came with four canisters graduated in size - one for flour, sugar, coffee and I don’t remember what was supposed to go in the smallest one. The largest one was the flour canister and that was the one I chose for storing my marbles. Over the years that canister has traveled with us as we moved from New York to Texas, back to New York and then finally returning to Texas once again.



In that canister are the marbles of my youth. Carefully placed inside of an old plastic bread bag (Hollywood Diet bread - price 29 cents), my special marbles are separated from the cheaper cat's eye marbles, by that plastic bag. My old favorites are still there, a light blue and yellow mustard colored bumper (over-sized marble) and a couple steelies (large ball bearings). The steelies were added to my collection back in 1954 when I was in Mrs. Bode's first grade class at Mattydale School. After all these years the unique characteristics of those older marbles still allow them to stand out while the mass produced cat's eye marbles just added ballast to the canister. I haven't played marbles since elementary school but I still see those marbles whenever we clean out the garage or when we occasionally move.



The ancient past time of Road Bowling in Ireland features the pitching of a 28 oz. metal ball along the roadway with the goal of covering the distance between two towns in the fewest number of pitches. While not ignoring other possible outcomes of the game, it was at least a good way of combating the boredom of the long walk between two towns. I

wasn't aware of the Irish game of Road Bowling in my elementary school days. It was much later, while doing some genealogy research, that I initially learned of this Irish past time and its similarity to our traveling marble game first struck me. At the time we didn't have a special name for the game – we just called it marbles and considered it an obvious variation on the game played within a circle.

Whether our marble game was passed down in one or more of our families or whether it was our Irish genes that led us to start playing the “traveling” marble game is unknown. When faced with similar circumstances people will sometimes come up with similar solutions to deal with the situation. Irish Road Bowling helped the Irish to pass the time while walking on the road to the next town in Ireland and our “traveling” marble game allowed us to do the same thing as we played our way back and forth to school each day.