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Scene and herd: Mondo croquet

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In "Alice in Wonderland," Lewis Carroll reimagined the grand old game of croquet played with hedgehogs and flamingos. More recently, a group of fun-loving Portlanders came up with a more modern idea.

Sledgehammers and bowling balls, old chap?

Such are the implements used in "Mondo Croquet," which will be played Sunday in downtown Portland for the ninth year. Participants will whack balls with sledgehammers through wickets made of rebar. Should a ball be reduced to fragments, that's no excuse for stopping the match; one simply continues with the largest shard and whacks it through the wickets. Play on.

Bernhard Masterson and Stephen Peters came up with the notion in 1996. "A friend of mine had a bowling ball display in her yard, and it just gave me the idea," Masterson says. "The game definitely plays a lot slower than regular croquet. Those balls don't move even if you really whack 'em."

But Mondo Croquet isn't just about brute strength. Appropriate sporting attire is important as well, which is why participants wear genteel fashions that would pass Martha Stewart's approval. (Think the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, or "The Great Gatsby.") The matches attract anywhere from six to 20 players, along with similarly garbed spectators who enjoy tea and crumpets on picnic blankets.

"Watching the spectators is as good as watching the game," Masterson says. "The first year we did it, the cops thought it was some sort of protest demonstration, and they kept driving by."

The event is a production of the Portland Cacophony Society, a group of free spirits that has hosted other cheerfully alarming activities, including a demolition derby performed with combine harvesters, a Halloween "pumpkin shoot" and the annual "Santa Con," with dozens of garbed St. Nicks invading downtown. But while the spirit of Mondo Croquet may be anarchical, the game itself is hardly anarchy.

"The most important rule is that you can't play unless you're in costume," says Mike "Mad Martian" Shkolnik, who has taken the championship four times in nine years. "Because if you're not in costume . . . well, that's just lame."

As a reigning champ, does Shkolnik have a secret? A lucky sledgehammer, perhaps?

"Naw," he says. "I just grab the first one I see."

As in golf, a few particular hazards are unique to the Mondo Croquet course, which is better known as the North Park Blocks.

"Every once in a while there's a bum sleeping in the middle of the field," Shkolnik says. "We just play around him. Very carefully."

The ninth annual Mondo Croquet match begins at noon Sunday in downtown Portland, in the North Park Blocks just off West Burnside.

-- Kevin Allman

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