

BAY AREA LIVING

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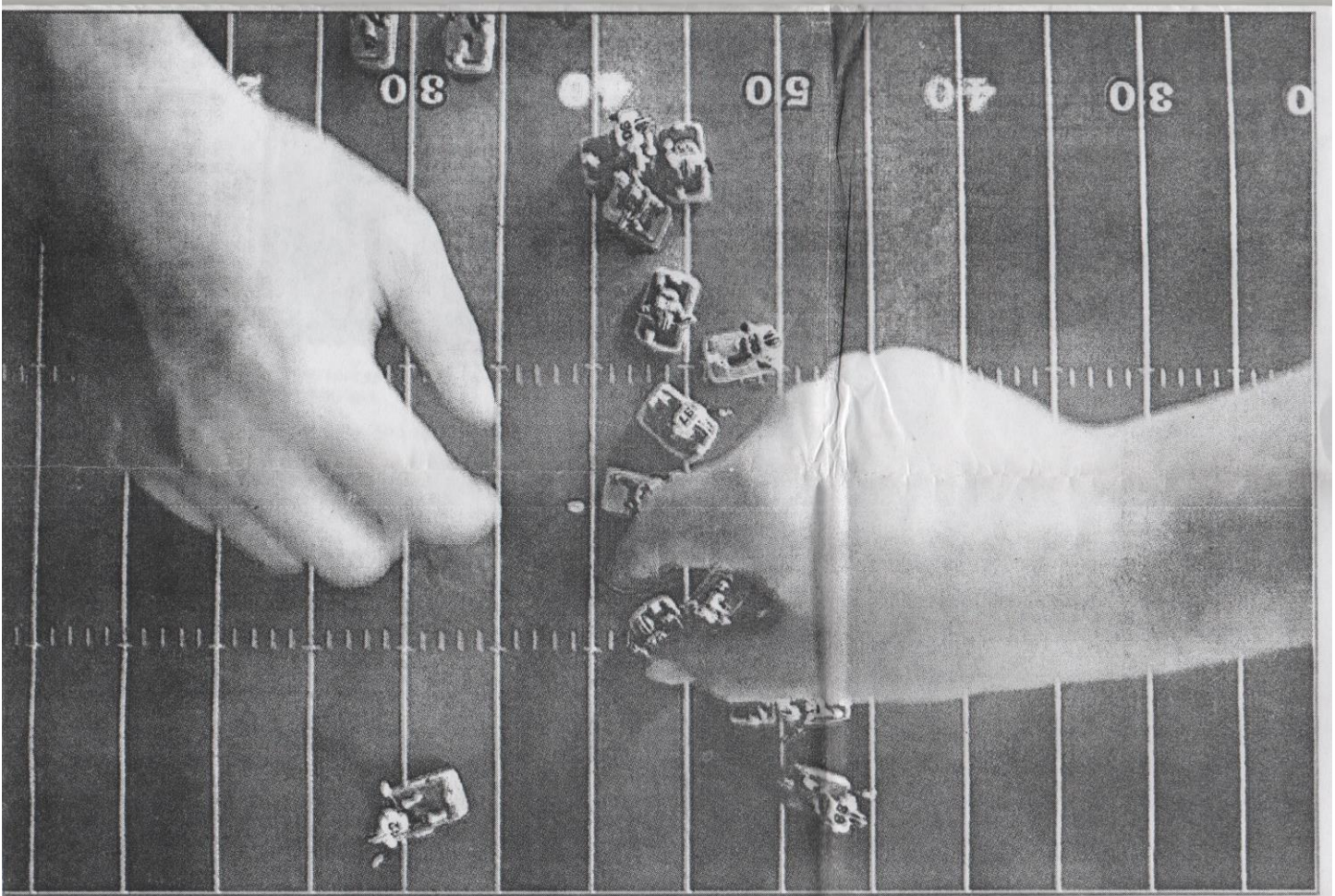
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ELECTRIC FOOTBALL - WHERE BABY OIL IS A STERIOD - STILL LIGHTS FANS UP



Photos by KEVIN W. WEINSTEIN

Garrett Garitano and Ben Neuhauser set up their Electric Football teams in real football formations. The field vibrates and players move around. The goal is to score TD's.

First and 10 - watt

By **PAUL STERMAN**
STAFF WRITER

Fifteen years ago, Garrett Garitano was shoving 300-pound linemen around the gridiron.

Now the players he's pushing down the field are an inch tall.

The Castro Valley resident is a

devotee of Electric Football - a game where miniature figures, representing the players, clash, spin an "run" on a board that is a replica of a football field. The movements, created when a switch is turned on to produce heavy

vibrations on the board, mirror the actions that happens in a real football game.

"There's unexpected spontaneity between the lines," says Garitano, "like in real football".

Which Garitano knows well, because he played for his college team. Standing 6 feet 5 and weighing 265 pounds - 20 pounds less than in his playing days - the 35-year-old father of three is a former defensive lineman for Delta State University in Mississippi.

He loves the sport, and now he gets his kicks from playing the toy version of it. Which is much safer.

Electric Football - or EF, as practitioners call it - represents a quirky little slice of Americana. First invented in 1947 and then significantly refined in the '60's, it's a game that many of us played when we were kids. It was a way for a child to connect vicariously with the pigskin competitions and gridiron heroes he saw on television.

Today, a segment of adults - all right, it's pretty much all men, - are taking up the game again and finding it makes for a fun hobby. Guys like Garitano and Burlingame resident Ben Neuhauser, who meet regularly at each other's homes to face off in electric battle.

"A lot of us grew up with this game - either your cousin had it or you had it," notes Garitano, a graphic artist who works for Mediacopy is San Leandro. "And then you put (the game) away for awhile."

"What's really exciting is that when you rediscover it, you can take what you've learned about football since that time and incorporate it into your playing.

Brains over Brawn

EF aficionados maintain there's plenty of strategy and football know-how involved in the game, and say that success can depend on how quickly you recognize the way certain plays and patterns unfold on the mini-field. The game has a quarterback/kicker figure that can be manipulated to pass or kick the little faux football.



Garitano of Castro Valley (left) and Neuhauser of Burlingame regularly play in each other's kitchens, it's the same game they played as children.

"When I am involved in a real tight defensive game, I usually get migraine headaches," says Garitano.

The strategy challenges are one reason followers like the game so much. There are guys who know and love football, and they're passionate about the toy version of the sport.

There are EF leagues throughout the country, particularly on the East Coast, where the hobby is the most popular. Garitano and Neuhauser are hoping to form a local league with six to eight teams and a playoffs system.

Miggle Toys, which makes the game, has held a national Electric Football convention the past six years, always the week before the Super Bowl. Each of the last two years the convention has drawn about 800 people, including enthusiasts from Canada, Italy and England.

National EF playoffs are conducted throughout the convention weekend, and finally, the top two practitioners match up their teams for Electric Football's own version of the Super Bowl.

The winner is awarded the Miggle Trophy.

A realistic look

EF enthusiasts want the full football experience. The player figures have painted-on jersey numbers and uniforms that reflect the design of the real National Football League team they represent Miggle even puts a Monday Night Football version of the game, which comes complete with a miniature lighted stadium.

A lot of guys buy Miggle players that come without painted-on jerseys so they can paint the intricate uniform designs onto the toy athletes.

Garitano does this - he's actually made a side business of it - and he's become so good that he was chosen by Sports Illustrated magazine to paint a set of EF players displayed in a recent issue of the magazine. The layout represented the magazine's choices for the best football players of the century.

In a chat room on Miggle's EF Web site (www.miggle.com), you get a sense of how involved the hobbyist with this game. Guys exchange messages about EF strategy, rules, technicalities, potential trades for EF equipment and who has made the

most dramatic comebacks in EF games.

One recent message in the chat room - called the "Huddle" - is from an architectural drafter from Pennsylvania who goes by the moniker "Raiderman." "He posed this query to his fellow footballers. "Since I have first found this site about eight months ago, it has grown majorly. My question is: What do you guys do for a living? Where do you work? All of us would like to stay home and play EF all day, but most of us can't."

Greg Thomas, a Fremont resident who plays EF, says the game has "a cult following."

Thomas, a toy designer for Learning Curve International, is an avid painter of the player figures. During the years he has painted EF uniform designs corresponding to all the National Football League teams as well as 60 college football squads.

Where to find EF

The product was originally made by Tudor Games, subsequently bought out by Miggle, Electric Football sells for \$50 - the most expensive version of the game goes for \$150 - and can be found in game, toy and sporting good stores. Toys 'R' Us and FAO Schwarz both carry the product.

On a recent Saturday afternoon in the kitchen of Garitano's home, he and Neuhauser played a short EF game using Garitano's vintage 1971 version of the game.

The two men - you can actually play the game by yourself as well - set up the teams in real football formations. The goal here is to score touchdowns, which, as in the real sport, you get four chances to try

to do in each series.

The guy whose team has the ball turns on the game switch, and then the players move. Then he turns the switch off after about a second and surveys where all the figures are aligned on the field. At that point, he must make a split-second decision whether he wants to run or pass the ball.

The players are on pronged bases which allow them to move up and down the field with a certain degree of control. Some of the more savvy combatants actually perform a process of "boiling" on the bases.

What's boiling you ask? Let's let Garitano explain:

"Basically, it's a well known fact that if you boil a pot of water with some baby oil in it, and drop some bases in for about five minutes, and then let them dry, the bases will perform better.

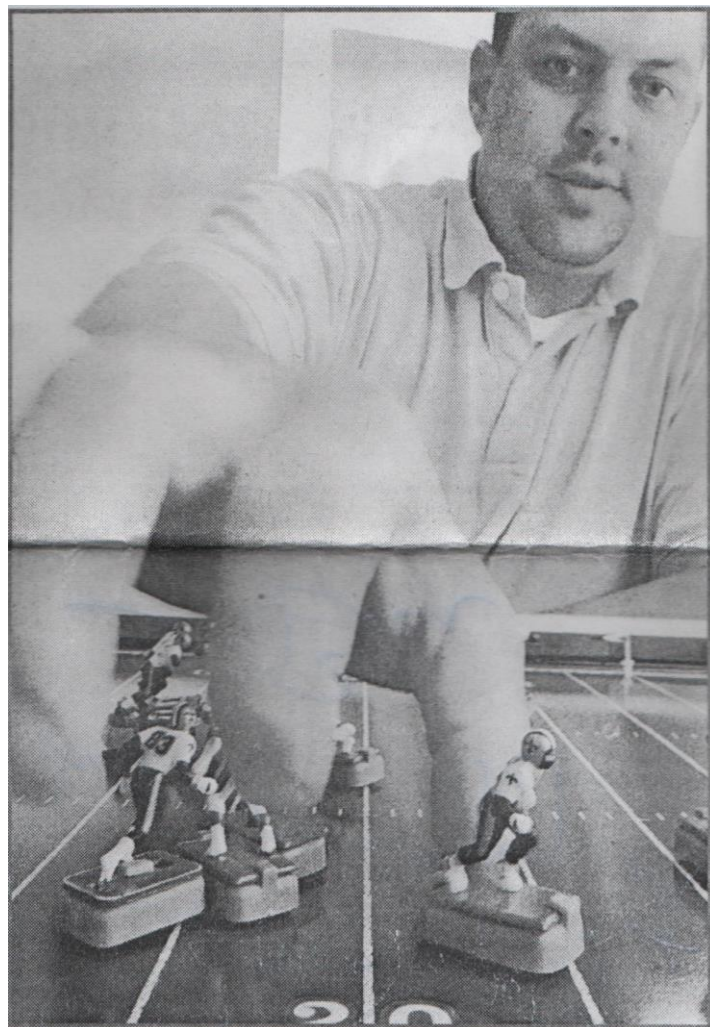
"It's almost like Electric Football steroids for the players. They run faster, they're stronger and they perform a lot better than with just your standard, pristine bases."

Garitano and Neuhauser, a 39-year-old advertising copywriter who played high school football, are engaged in a close contest, with each man scoring fairly easily. But Garitano wins the duel when Neuhauser's quarterback falters on the last play of the game.

Neuhauser laments that he had the wrong type of base on the quarterback - a grievous "coaching error," he admits.

Wanting to win

The two friends are clearly having a good time. They laugh and joke around as they battle it out on the board. But they also acknowledge



KEVIN W. WEINSTEIN

Garitano scoops up his players to set them up for the next series of downs.

that sometimes these kitchen competitions can get pretty intense.

"I refer to myself as an 'Electric Football psycho,'" says Garitano with a smile.

"My wife thought I was nuts - until she met Garrett," quips Neuhauser.

Watching the two guys play on this afternoon is Neuhauser's buddy, Allen Hayes. He's having a blast as well.

"I remember playing this as a kid," says the 53-year-old Palo Alto resident. "This brought a lot of fun and nostalgia back. I really remember losing myself in this game.

"There's something about this that's different than all the video stuff these days that is so sophisticated and automatic. You don't get involved when you are playing that stuff. With this, even

though you have these silly little guys who are jiggling around, you get involved with it.”

Michael Landsman, president of Illinois-based Miggle, is, predictably a big cheerleader for Electric Football.

“I played this game as a child and as an adult growing up, and I’ve sold it in wholesale business and retail business, and the continual growth of this game is amazing,” says Landman in a phone interview. “The reason for that is it’s a three-dimensional game. You’re the quarterback, you’re the coach and you’re playing with other people. You’re not sitting in front of a computer, so it’s a social game.

Landsman recalled the first EF Convention Miggle held in a Chicago restaurant named after Michael Jordan. The people who came out to that debut event, he says, were closet EF players - they had no idea if there

were other like-minded enthusiasts out there or if they were the only ones who were consumed by this sports game.

“About 300 people showed up,” says Landsman, who is considered the commissioner of the national Electric Football League. “They were all afraid to come because they thought they would be the only ones there. It was the cutest thing you ever saw.”

Sideline businesses

Seminars and clinics are held at these conventions - which are free - and lots of memorabilia and EF accessories are sold by people who have created side businesses from the game. Garitano is one of those people.

He gets about five to 10 orders a week from people around the country to paint EF teams. Usually, the

requests, which typically come from EF players as well as collectors, are for old football teams that no longer exist or whose uniforms look completely different today.

Garitano consults his personal archive of football literature and materials so he can duplicate the exact look of the uniforms he will paint onto the bare figures. It’s a detailed and painstaking process. This rabid football fan says he loves it.

“I probably spend 30 hours a week on it,” says Garitano, who has Joe Montana, Jerry Rice and Kenny Stabler figures among his collection. “My night job is painting (these figures). I get home (from work), spend time with my family and then when everybody goes to bed, I’m up painting to the wee hours in the morning.”
