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**The Buzz Bowl; Electric football is 50 years old now. So are some boys who never outgrew it. As they gather for a mini-Super Bowl, a Columbia aficionado explains the game's electrifying history.**

**By CHRIS KALTENBACH Baltimore Sun • Jan 22, 1999**

Has there ever been a game more loved but less understood than electric football?

You know the game, that flat sheet of metal attached to an electric switch that, when thrown, causes the whole contraption to shake like a volcano about to blow. And, of course, to make that distinctive buzzzzzzzzing sound that was a staple of Christmas mornings. Put a gaggle of plastic football players on top, throw a tiny felt football into the mix and you've got what the game's promoters swear is a tabletop version of the real thing.

Right, so long as the real thing is played by falling-down drunks who'd just as soon dance with a goalpost than go out for a pass.

Hey, just ask Earl Shores, an electric football enthusiast -- he's got probably 30 different versions stashed away in the basement of his Columbia home -- who admits he's never quite mastered the game.

This weekend, he'll be in Philadelphia for Super Bowl 5, an annual competition sponsored by electric football manufacturer Miggle Toys, successor to the revered Tudor Metal Products, which marketed the first game 50 years ago. But while others go at one another on the electric gridiron, he'll be buying, selling and trading the games with his fellow armchair quarterbacks.

"I am way out of my league, competitively," says the 38-year-old freelance writer, who's writing a book about the game with partner Roddy Garcia. "These guys are serious. I like to sort of lose myself in the game for a while; these guys who take the game seriously, they don't lose themselves, they get wound up."

Shores may not have mastered the vagaries of the game itself -- how bending the tiny plastic teeth beneath the players' base affects their direction, how getting just the right angle on a "kick" can actually enable players to pinpoint where the football goes -- but he understands all about its allure.

"It's a great toy," he says. "It's a game you could play all by yourself, it's a game where you could pretty much make up your own rules. It's just a lot of fun."

For aging male baby boomers, many of whom hounded their parents (who knew all about that dreadful electric buzz, since their friends' kids had the game already) into ordering the game from the Sears catalog, stepping into Shores' basement is like stepping back 30 years.

There are display cases filled with the plastic players, each perched atop rectangular plastic bases with eight tiny prongs that come into contact with the metal "field." There's the quarterback that passed and kicked, a spring-loaded contraption that looked like the height of technology to a 10-year-old. There are the tiny felt footballs that were always getting lost in shag carpeting, heating vents or mom's vacuum cleaner.

But mostly, there are the game boxes themselves. At first the height of plain -- the original 1949 models came in brown boxes adorned with two players drawn in a style any kid could duplicate -- they gradually became more and more elaborate. By the 1970s, they featured pictures of screaming fans, opposing players competing for a pass, referees signaling touchdown, maybe even a football superstar (Joe Namath had his own signature game).

Open those boxes up, and an entire football stadium unfolds before your eyes (provided your 10-year-old imagination hasn't completely atrophied).

Again, things started off simply, a green field with a red border and yard markers put down in yellow; even the players were of one design and color. But by the 1970s, electric games were being played in replica domes, with electric lights shining down. Elaborate scoreboards kept track of the action, and timers would dictate when the game was over.

Players were painted in the colors of your favorite NFL team (additional teams could be bought through the mail). True fans got one of the special Super Bowl editions, which came with the Vince Lombardi Trophy painted on the field. There were three of those, manufactured from 1969 (featuring the Jets vs. the Colts; no need to talk more about that here) to 1971 (when Jim O'Brien's last-second field goal put the Colts back up where they belonged).

"Oh yeah, you can't help but find a lot of Colts in games from those years," says Shores, a transplanted Pennsylvanian whose loyalties run more toward the Eagles. "They were a dominant team."

Further proof that the old days really were the best days. But we digress ...

As for the game itself? That remains as indecipherable as ever.

Theoretically, the rules were the same as football itself; the original instruction booklet, in deadpan seriousness, goes on about how to judge whether a field goal is good, the difference between complete and incomplete passes, and what a safety is. You'd line up the offense against the defense -- one of electric football's great advantages was that it worked just as well with one player or two -- flick the switch and watch how the play you'd so carefully designed panned out.

In reality, what most of us did was simply arrange the players on the field, turn on the switch and watch chaos theory play itself out.

After deliberately lining up both sides, using elaborate formations -- Every player on the same side? Why not? -- you'd flick the switch. Immediately, two or three players would fall on their sides and start spinning around in circles (break-dancing may have been invented here). At least one figure could be counted on to latch his arm around a goalpost and stiffly square-dance around it.

Stop the action to have your quarterback throw his felt football, and it might sail off the game board into oblivion, never to be found again. Or it might travel a few inches and fall to the metal field like a wounded bird.

In a competitive game, you could count on endless debates over the rules. For a pass to be complete, did it have to hit the player square? What if it glanced off his base? What if one of your guys skirted the goal line, only to be vibrated back in the other direction? What constituted a tackle? Did the front of one player have to hit the front of another? Or was it enough if just their corners touched? And trying to figure out

whether a field goal was good, when the tiny football invariably was kicked inches -- if not feet -- above the goalpost -- forget it.

As a result, it didn't take long for most players to stop caring, and put their games up on a shelf. Not so the competitors at this weekend's electric football Super Bowl, which winds up Sunday.

They know all about adjusting the little tabs, about using certain bases that perform better than others (on some, experts can tell the better ones by the different shades of green), about tricks like using lead paint to make the figures heavier (illegal in competition, but handy in "friendly" games).

"It does take time to learn," says James Crews of Harrisburg, Pa., who won last month's Philadelphia city championship. "You're dealing with a lot of variables, different types of plastics, different types of motors on the boards.

"You have to develop a strategy or some type of procedure in order to make the bases do exactly what you want them to do," he adds. "And that could take years."

Years? What real kid at heart has time for that? Better to just turn the thing on and let the shaking begin.

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