

TODAY



PHOTOS BY ALGERINA PERA (SUN PHOTOGRAPHER)

Fans get a buzz from electric football, which will stage its 12th Super Bowl in Hunt Valley this weekend

Super Charged

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BY ROB HIAASEN (SUN REPORTER)



Rene Smith examines his Ray Lewis electric football figure and sets up the game table.

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ATT STOVER BLEW IT IN LAST year's Super Bowl. Missed it wide right. Matt Stover - the greatest offensive weapon the Raven's have ever known!

"The kicker let me down", says Rene Smith. "He sure did."

Before this goes on too long, please know that Rene Smith, a 49-year-old Catonsville man, is talking about the forgotten , frustrating game of electric football. Forget about fantasy football leagues and those Madden NFL state-of-the-art graphics video games. real man still play electric football.

Well call them middle-aged guys who probably received their first Tudor Tru-Action electric football game as young football fans in the 1960's. Remember the buzzing? Remember the aimless play of your of your vibrating Bears or Cardinals football team? Scoring was just a dream some of us players had.

In the 40 years since, Tudor became Miggle Toys, which resurrected the game in the 1990's. Thanks to company chat boards and a crafty public relations effort, electric football staged an improbable comeback. More than 500 players are expected this weekend in Hunt Valley to attend the 12th annual Official Electric Football Super Bowl (yes, there been 11 others). The convention begins tomorrow and, after single game elimination rounds, The Miggle EFL Super Bowl will be held Sunday. No word on tailgating opportunities.

Smith was a field goal short of making it to the championship game at last year's Electric Football Super Bowl in Pittsburgh. But Smith managed a third-place finish among 70 "coaches" who competed. This weekend, he plans to bring ack his dream team - the '96 Ravens, of all teams - and has no plans of making any roster changes.

"Stover comes back. He's got to come back."

Is the game coming back to you now? Electric Football was played on a metal tabletop that vibrated when the motor was switched on. The game, which was introduced in 1947, promised that "Players Actually 'Block and Tackle'" - that's what the cardboard box said anyway. Families ordered the game through Sears. If you didn't get one for the holidays, you over to a friend who did. Never before did a childhood gift arrive with such promise, such potential.

The football players were plastic figures wedged onto pronged bases. You could theoretically bend or twist the player base to increase speed. To run a play, a felt football (how many of *those* were pumped up?) was

tucked under a player's arm, and the motor was switched on by the offensive "coach." The play ended when the player's base touched a defensive player's base or the player happened to score.

Electric football still has a "triple threat quarterback" that can pass, punt and kick field goals. The mechanized quarterback arm can flick the football to a receiver. If the ball touches the player or his base, it's a completion. In the old days, kids would set up V-shaped wedges on offense, but this just induced embarrassing traffic jams. Players often and unintentionally hooked their arms around a goal post in a sort of dance if death. During other plays, the rudderless running backs tended to veer out of bounds or just spin in hapless circles like drunken bumper cars. But, by God, the game was electric.

In short, electric football was one great , bad game, It was true fantasy football.

Then those boomers grew up and discovered Gameboys and PlayStations and Madden NFL video games. But, as it turns out, electric football never really went away - and its admirers say it's truly new and improved.

During the NFL playoffs, Sony's ad for high-definition TV featured an electric football game reenacting the famous 1982 Cal-Stanford football game when band members rushed the field during an improbable kickoff return. The Pro Football Hall of Fame has an electric football exhibit - and hosted Miggle's seventh Super Bowl in 2001. The classic game boards pop up[on eBay where a vintage Tudor electric football game can start at \$19.99.

The modern Miggle electric football game has NFL-sanctioned uniform colors and logos, and players come in various sizes and poses. The \$60 Super Bowl version includes accessories such as scoreboards, signage and cheerleader figures. Current players say that the motor has been improved to better control speed and player direction.

"We can get the men to run straight or run at an angle. The game is actually more organized and precise than when we were kids," says Smith, a welfare-program worker in Washington. He got re-hooked on electric football six years ago when he attended the



Rene's Johnny Unitas figure. Smith will compete in Sunday's Electric Football Super Bowl in Hunt Valley

sixth Super Bowl. "The DC area is a hotbed for electric football." Who knew?

Derell Brevard, a 38-year-old bail bondsman from Suitland, is a member of the Beltway Electric Football League - 28 members strong. "And always looking for more," as Brevard says. He brings his 1995 49ers electric football team to Hunt Valley this weekend. He is a veteran of eight Super Bowls as a spectator, and this will be his first competition. He's ready. His team is ready.

"People will be in awe of how this game evolved," Brevard says. "Electric Football has finally lived up to its hype."

So, how do you make a Jerome Bettis or Shaun Alexander run straight? It's all in the *tweaking*. The plastic bristles or prongs under the player bases can be "manipulated" to improve direction. Scoring is a reality. And fortunately for this weekend's Super Bowl participants, tampering with base is allowed, according to Tournament Rule 2.0 (2): Base prongs may be manipulated (i.e., bending, twisting, or brushing) by hand. No tools (pliers, blades, etc.) may be used.

To enforce the rules, the EFL Super Bowl will have its own official. Debbie Weinberg, a Baltimore accountant and long-time high school official, got the call early this month from electric football's front office (Miggle headquarters in Illinois). She hadn't thought of the game in years until she remembered playing it with her brother in the 1960's. She was both fascinated and perplexed by the buzzing toy.



High school football official Debbie Weinberg will oversee the Electric Football Super Bowl.

MONICA LOPOSSAY (SUN PHOTOGRAPHER)

"How can you ever make a game of this?", Weinberg always wondered. But she jumped at the chance to officiate her first Super Bowl - even though it's the vibrating board kind.

"It's still football - who cares?"

Weinberg will wear her professional "zebra"

uniform and tuck her hair in her hat and forego makeup and jewelry - her routine for officiating area high school games; she also worked the University of Maryland football chain crew during quarterback Boomer Esiason's years. To prepare for her most unusual assignment, Weinberg has been pouring over the eight pages of tournament regulations. *A possession consists of four downs only. The team that is able to score the most points with its possession wins the game. If neither team scores, then the team gaining the most yardage wins the game.*

In other words, coaches don't necessarily have to sweat the scoring. just get your men to move straight, Bend , twist, brush to your childhood's delight - just don't use pliers or blades when tweaking.

And Matt Stover, be ready.

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