

Three Ball Circus



An international juggling convention is a dizzying whirl of sportsmanship, showmanship and one-upmanship. But what else would you expect?

BY CHARLES ABELL

A

team called Holy Smokes stands on stage in the hushed auditorium, four robed figures — a middle-aged couple and their two children — who have come to Akron, Ohio, to compete in the 1987 U.S. National Juggling Championships. As the first notes of "When the Saints Go Marching In" are heard, they explode into their star pattern. The partners spread out in a circle and pass 12 juggling clubs in a carefully formulated sequence — a five-point star in motion.

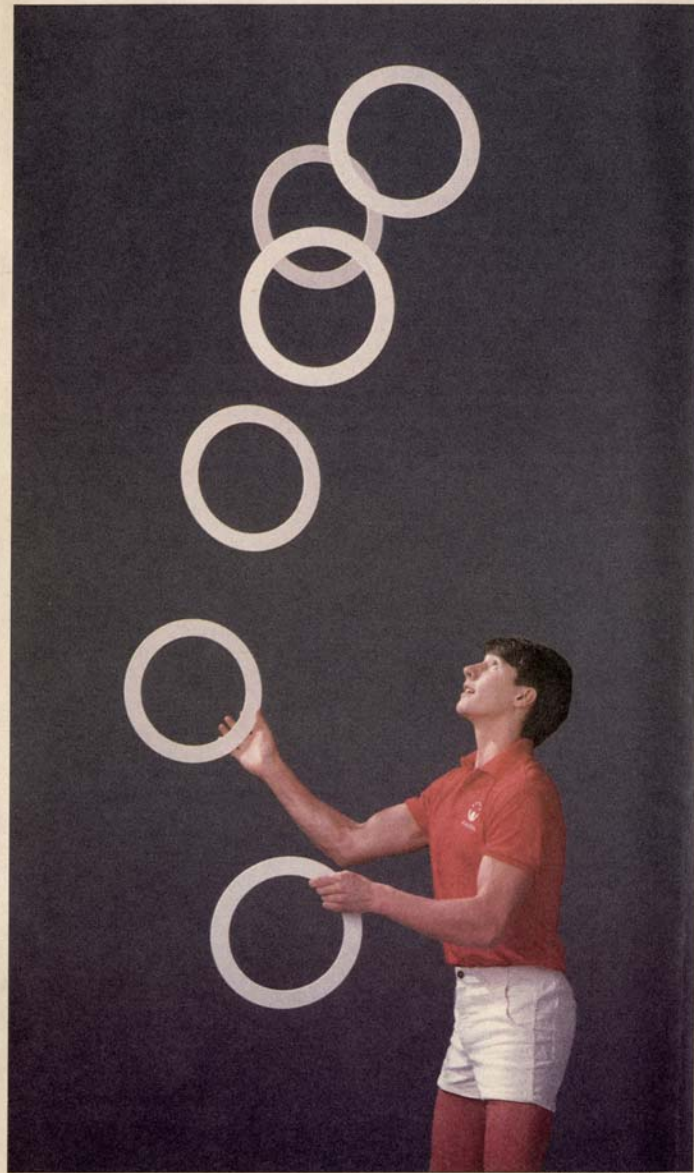
The famous Raspyini Brothers — known for their appearances on "The Tonight Show" — follow with a masterly performance, executing, at one point, a trick referred to as juggling "tennis," in which, during an eight-club passing pattern, the partners throw one club back and forth over the top of the pattern, creating the illusion of a tennis ball going over a net.

A final team, a trio from Boone, N.C., called Manic Expressions, displays an extended "weave" configuration, in which the jugglers, handling three clubs each, walk around each other in a figure eight, often through the line of fire of the clubs, while taking turns passing to a "feeder." They complete the act with only two dropped clubs.

In the singles competition, the Amazing Larry Vee takes the stage and begins by spinning a Hula-Hoop around his waist and bouncing on a pogo stick, while at the same time juggling five clubs. His performance is a series of bizarre acts, such as a trick where he mounts a unicycle and has

CHARLES ABELL is a summer intern at The News.

UP IN THE AIR: Among juggling's enthusiastic practitioners are 15-year-old John Webster, below; and Dave Finnigan, opposite page, shown demonstrating the basic three-ball maneuver.



PHOTOS BY PHILIP AMDAHL

his assistants toss him clubs, balls and other objects while he's pedaling. For his grand finale, he stands on a bongo board (a cylinder placed horizontally on the floor with a board balanced on it), spins a Hula-Hoop around his waist, balances a broom on his nose and juggles a basketball and a club in his left hand and three balls in his right.

The next performer, Jeff Mason, accompanied by the meditative music of Brian Eno and David Byrne, begins by manipulating three cigar boxes under his legs and around his back. After doing some hat manipulations, he concludes with a fascinating diabolo presentation — an art of Chinese origin in which he spins, throws and catches a luminescent plastic spool with the aid of a string tied to two sticks. The routine resembles an intricate yo-yo trick in which the string is crossed and recrossed to form a design like a spider web, the whole time allowing the "spider" — the glowing spool — to move freely within and around the pattern.

Then the undaunted 21-year-old Benji Hill from Thomasville, N.C., comes on and dazzles the audience and judges with a series of highly technical routines, including a trick in which he reverses, and rereverses, five two-color rings to create several "color changes" — red, blue, red, blue, red, blue. He does a pirouette while juggling six clubs and concludes by executing an extraordinary five-club behind-the-back maneuver. (That one took him three tries, but he did it.)

After 4½ hours all the jugglers have taken their bows, and the judges begin deliberations. When the results come in, Manic Expressions has won the team competition, and Benji Hill has edged out Jeff Mason for the singles title.

Later, I go to congratulate Hill and am astonished to find him depressed. "I'm bummed about the ending," he says. "I can do that 'five behind the back.'"

His failed attempt to perform that trick lost him the nationals last year, he explains, and he had spent nearly six months perfecting his routine. "I wanted to break the reputation I had that I was a good juggler but not a good performer. The six months I took was an investment in my future."

One thousand dollars and a silver trophy later, he says his return has been respectable.

These days, competitions are only one of the ways juggling is getting off the ground.

In 1978, the release of John Cassidy's book "Juggling for the Complete Klutz," which has sold more than 1 million copies, propelled juggling into the public eye. That same year, the International Juggling Association established its first permanent headquarters, in Kenmore.

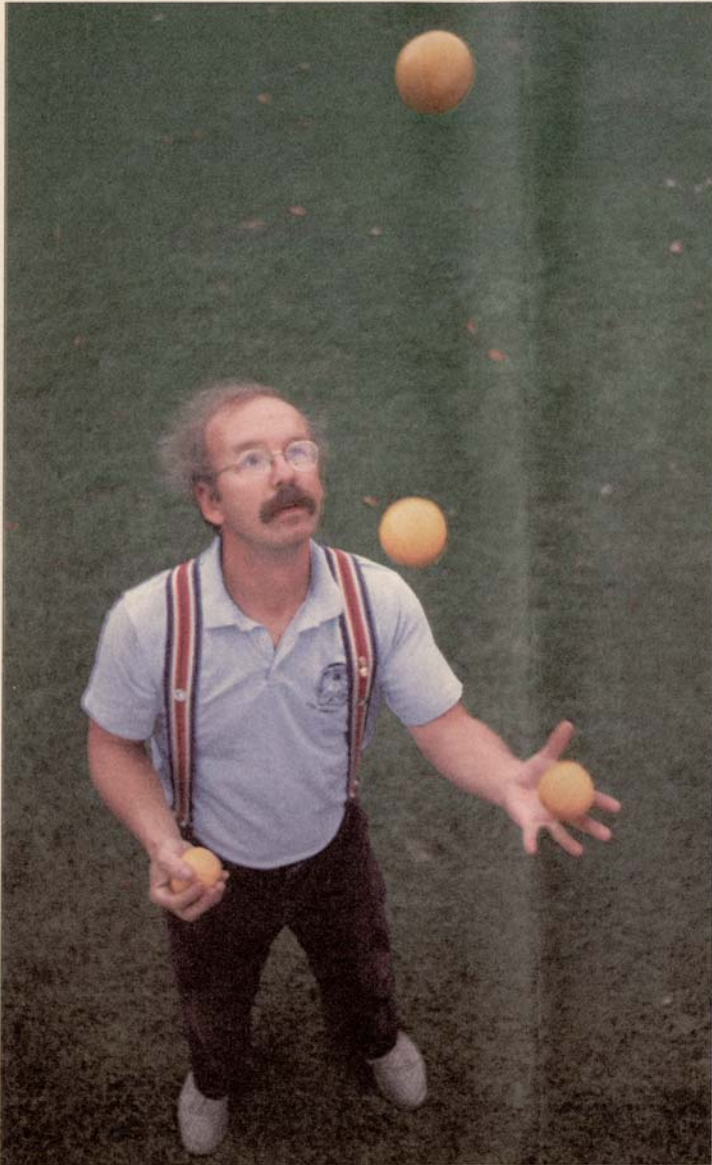
In 1981, the association began distributing its monthly magazine, *Juggler's World*. The publication now reaches more than 3,000 people in more than 25 countries.

This year, two books have been published that may make juggling a mainstream pastime: "The Complete Juggler" by Dave Finnigan, and "Juggling With Finesse" by Kit Summers.

Finnigan has gone further than any other juggler to formalize, articulate and market a philosophy of juggling.

Continued on Page 16

RICH CHAMBERLIN: *The International Juggling Association chairman says that if juggling could find a corporate sponsor, it could become a mainstream sport.*



PHOTOS BY MIKE GROLL/BUFFALO NEWS

Circus

Continued from Page 15

His biography is as impressive as his best juggling tricks. Finnigan's nickname is Professor Confidence; his profile begins with two degrees — a bachelor's in sociology and anthropology from Cornell University and a master's in public health education from the University of California at Berkeley.

From 1966 to 1975 he worked in population and family planning programs in Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal and Turkey. He has worked for the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, the Population Council, various United Nations agencies, the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

He was introduced to juggling in 1976 while pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of Washington. He liked it so much that he dropped out of college and became a professional juggler. Since then, he has taught 350,000 people how to juggle and has performed and taught at more than 300 schools in a dozen states and three Canadian provinces.

Finnigan remembers his beginnings as a juggler. One early difficulty was that he couldn't find good equipment. So in 1977 he founded Jugglebug Inc. — marketers, he says, of "high-quality, mass-produced juggling equipment." In a decade, the company's line has gone from five products to 152.

His success hasn't been effortless. "I got in my car and drove from Seattle, Wash., to Orono, Maine, to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to San Diego, Calif., and I went to every magic store I could find. Everywhere I walked in the door they said, 'Juggling equipment, where have you been?'"

That same year, he helped to form the Juggling Institute, a national network of professionally trained and certified instructors.

"The Complete Juggler" (Vintage Books) is a 600-page manual with more than 1,000 illustrations. Using the book, a person can learn to juggle

Continued on Page 25



SAY WHAT?: *Jim Neff of the Buffalo Juggling Club clowns his way through a tilted trick.*

Circus

Continued from Page 16

in stages and receive a pin and a certificate from the International Juggling Association for each level he masters.

Kit Summers' "Juggling With Finesse" was released shortly after "The Complete Juggler," and is the product of six years of anguish and frustration.

In 1982, Summers — a 28-year-old, sandy-haired Californian — was basking in his rise to the top of the juggling world, enjoying a nine-month stand at Bally's Place Casino in Atlantic City. Less than a year later, he was lying unconscious in a hospital bed, where he spent 37 days after being struck by a speeding truck in Atlantic City. He explains that when he awoke from the coma his mind was intact, but "the strings between it and my body were cut."

While recuperating, Summers began writing. "After the accident, I wanted to be a juggler again. I knew what to do, but I just needed to retrain my nerve pathways. But to learn to juggle was boring and frustrating. It wasn't the same. There's so much more you can do in your life. I wanted to go for other things."

Actor Peter Scolari, of television's "Newhart" and "Bosom Buddies," has said he plans to make a movie about Summers' life. It may be that this juggler's labor of love pays off after all.

The International Juggling Association celebrated its 40th anniversary not long ago with a convention in Akron, and it was a ball.

The association's first convention, in 1948, a year after the group's founding, was a celebration of the juggling community's official separation from the International Brotherhood of Magicians. Ever since, the annual conventions have provided a forum for jugglers to share, learn and teach.

The Akron convention was an embarrassment of riches. The convention attracted more than 800 participants and hundreds of observers from more than a dozen countries, including Holland, Australia and China.

Among the entrants was Edward Jackman, runner-up in the 1985 and 1986 U.S. championships, who circled around the frenzied gymnasium demonstrating a new trick, a four-ball routine in which he bounces one ball on his forehead while juggling the other three. Jackman is best-known for juggling five clubs while balancing a 10-speed bike on his forehead.

Another participant was Albert Lucas, who has equaled or beaten most world records with 10 balls, 12 rings and seven clubs and is one of the few jugglers to have a trick named after him. "Albert throws" refers to a pattern in which clubs are thrown between the legs from front to back without lifting the feet off the ground. (Throws made from back to front are reverse Albert throws, or "treblas.")

Another feature of the festival was the kaleidoscope of equipment on display. The

Continued on Page 26

Circus

Continued from Page 26

Back in vaudeville days, a stage juggler would often omit the best trick in his routine if another juggler was in the house. These days, even the most innovative routines are demonstrated with pride.

In Benji Hill's view, jugglers are handicapped by the lack of formal training available. "I hear a lot of, 'Why bother?'" he says. "The one thing you see in dance is perfection, but that's because they have coaches. I don't know how long it's going to take, but I think what we need to do is get a school set up. Let some of these young people spend six months on an act."

"In the gym, juggling is a sport. On stage, it's an art."

Sean Roberts, a member of the Buffalo Juggling Club and an occasional street performer, says juggling is a valid art, but it's appreciated only by other jugglers. The public image of juggling, he says, is obsolete.

"Juggling is both serious and not serious," he says. "The precision part, it's beautiful, but it's less appreciated by the general crowds you perform for. That's why jugglers look forward to the convention. Juggling has become art for art's sake. When guys try something really difficult, they try to do it for themselves."

Roberts' most striking feature is abundant curly-blond hair that seems to shoot out from his head in little lightning bolts. He is a junior at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where he performs with a "band" that combines music, juggling and poetry. Though he's intrigued with the prospect of choreographing juggling routines along the same principles as dance, he is unsure how well the medium would be accepted.

"The big thing is for juggling to become detached from comedy. That's the big thing that keeps juggling what it is and not something more."

"A lot of performers grew out of street performers. The idea in street performing is to capture people's attention and keep them there. People might stop and say, 'That's great,' but they might leave before you pass the hat."

"That's why they filled in with comedy. The discourse

with the audience is a good entertaining technique to keep the audience involved. If you're just doing tricks, people aren't going to appreciate them that much."

Jugglers are imperfect, but no more imperfect than dancers or concert musicians. Drops are part of the nature of the act. Maybe juggling's image problem stems from the visibility of a juggler's mistakes. A guitarist may miss a note, a dancer a step, and no one may notice. But when a juggler drops a club, the flow of the performance, and the viability of the illusion, is disrupted.

"Juggling is like ballet in one respect — it's the aesthetic appeal, not the technical skill so much," Roberts says. "But there's more of an element of improvisation in juggling. The visibility of the mistake means you have to cover for it. There's much more of an attempt to deceive the audience."

Roberts perhaps best exemplifies the two faces of juggling — the entertainer and the athlete. In fact, jugglers always have been divided along these lines, but now the schism is much more pronounced. The Benji Hills and the Renegade troupes most clearly represent the two poles, and the strains between proponents of the two styles are evident. Nevertheless, there remain many people like Roberts who are trying to retain the best of both worlds.

Chamberlin says that as long as the juggling association can contain the different groups and meet their needs, no schism may occur. But he recognizes that differences do exist. The Renegades continue to project a countercultural, anti-competition image with their outrageous presentations. At the other extreme, Chamberlin says, Finnigan is pushing juggling as a sport and a hobby.

Chamberlin says juggling is both art and sport because it demands both technical skill and physical conditioning, a fact which gave rise to the particular judging system used in competitions. "We tried to think what would happen if someone comes on stage, has no costume and poor equipment, but does great tricks. Another juggler who comes on has great equipment and a good cos-

Continued on Page 30

Circus

Continued from Page 28

tume, but does lousy tricks. How do you judge that? We decided to split it down the middle."

As a result, there have been some surprising victories in recent championships, such as the 1983 winner, Allan Jacobs, who won using only two clubs, and the 1986 winner, Andrew Head, who dazzled judges with a hat manipulation. Originality, Chamberlin says, can earn competitors higher scores. "The first person to come up with an idea gets the points for it."

Still, Chamberlin says the future of juggling lies in education, not competitions. Though competitions include 10 to 20 people, he says, a system like Finnigan's can reach millions.

Chamberlin says corporate sponsorship for juggling is all that is holding it back from becoming a mainstream sport.

If competitions continue to grow at the current rate, say, to the point where they begin to appear on television, most jugglers admit that a full-scale schism between "technical" and "comic" jugglers — like the one that occurred in 1947 between juggling and magic — will be inevitable.

In addition, the advances juggling is making within the spheres of education, health and business may mean more incentives for jugglers to get

serious about their trade.

At its highest levels, though, juggling transcends the dichotomy of art-sport-entertainment, taking the form of an intense, consciousness-raising ritual like meditation or yoga.

"There is no way to separate what your body and your mind do in your spiritual growth," Finnigan says. "While you are juggling, the past is gone and the future doesn't exist. You are in the present moment. All of the meditative arts and mystical religions attempt to take you to that place where juggling can take you in an instant."

When a person juggles for a long time, his brain begins to release endorphins, creating a state of euphoria. Finnigan describes this condition as a type of positive addiction, in which "you are constantly on the edge of your ability, constantly challenging yourself to grow."

"When you first learn to juggle, you worry, think and count — your left brain does all the work. Once you juggle continually, you no longer do those things and the right brain is doing all the work. Once you can hold a conversation and juggle at the same time, both sides of the brain are working simultaneously. This is the peak experience, and people strive to have peak experiences which last for seconds when all they have to do is juggle. That's why I'm an evangelist for juggling." ■

BUFFALO CHIPS

BY TOM STRATTON

MARINELAND'S ONLY UNINTELLIGENT DOLPHIN.



I GIVE UP --- WHAT'S THE HOOP AND LITTLE DEAD FISH FOR?



BUFFALO MAGAZINE/SEPTEMBER 27, 1987



CLUB CONCENTRATION: David Cain is all intensity on his way to a second-place finish in the juniors competition in Akron.